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Secure in their Beliefs

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“We may die at any minute. The Indian troops know the routes we use and maybe they are lying in wait. We are going in the dead of winter when only crazy people would go because maybe they will not be watching. It is impossible to cross the mountains. We are impossible. We are invisible and impossible and we are going over the mountains to be free.”

The speaker is Shalimar the Clown, the eponymous character in Salman Rushdie’s (2005) novel, and he is addressing the Kashmiri wife who left him for an American lover as he crosses the mountains to join a militant Islamist group. The fictional Shalimar's trajectory from personal grievance, through extremist violence-justifying ideology, to the sacrifice of security and safety in the name of a religiously sanctioned goal reflects that of many real-world extremists. Rushdie’s novel is a work of fiction, of course, but all too often we learn of individuals who make similar choices: who gladly trade not only their personal security but the safety and lives of others in the service of radically violent ideologies. The consequence of such choices is the rising death toll from terror attacks in the past decades, begging the question of why some individuals are motivated to sacrifice their safety, if not their lives, while perpetrating terror in the name of a cause. We address this question in the pages that follow.

Ensuring physical survival and addressing basic biological needs are among the strongest driving forces governing the behavior of every living creature. As Maslow (1943) put it, safety needs “may serve as the almost exclusive organizers of behavior, recruiting all the capacities of the organism in their service, and we may then fairly describe the whole organism as a safety-seeking mechanism” (p. 376). And yet despite this fundamental motivation, and despite human beings’ unique awareness of the finality of their existence and their inevitable mortality (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991), we witness individuals who not only court death in the service of goals other than survival but knowingly sacrifice their lives to promote those goals. We suggest that the psychological mechanism driving this choice in the context of radicalization and terrorism, particularly suicide terrorism, is the quest for significance.
The Quest for Significance

The attempt to find self-transcendence (Frankl, 2000), self-actualization (Maslow, 1943), or a sense of meaning to one’s existence is directed by what society deems as meaningful: what values and goals are approved and endorsed by the culture to which one belongs. Under certain circumstances, this motivation can lead people engage in violent, destructive actions in the name of their group.

In a sense, it is a psychological insecurity that drives people to give up their physical security in exchange for a feeling of meaningful existence. When circumstances, personal or collective, undermine the individual’s sense of security in the knowledge of who he or she is; when reality shifts and the safety of one’s place in society is lost—then the danger of these individuals adhering to radical ideologies and committing violent action on their behalf looms large. Unlike other theories linking discontent to support for aggression, such as the ideological theory of scapegoating (Glick, 2005), we include in our model two critical components missing in other formulations: collectivistic shift and violent ideology. According to our theory, the coupling of psychological insecurity and extremist violence-justifying ideologies is what sets the ground for radicalization and terrorism. The feeling of insecurity about one’s self-worth brings the goal of personal significance to the fore; the extremist ideology provides the means to this goal.

In the present chapter we begin by discussing the need for security and safety as a fundamental human motivation. We describe the quest to achieve personal significance as an overriding motivational need and a central driving force behind radicalization and terrorism, then present recent empirical evidence consistent with our theory. We end with concluding remarks on the cycle of insecurity and radicalization.

Security as a Basic Motivation

Security and safety are central elements in any organism’s wellbeing. Among those who emphasized their importance were Kluckhohn (1951), Maslow (1943, 1967), and Williams (1968), among others. For example, Maslow (1943) described safety as one of the most basic goals, at times even surpassing physical needs: “practically everything looks less important than safety” (p. 376). Schwartz (1992; Schwartz & Bilski, 1987) describes security as fundamental human value, with a motivational goal of “safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of self” (Schwartz, 1992, p. 9). It is a value shared by many different cultures (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2001) and is of similar importance in different societies (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001).

Despite its depiction as a fundamental motivation, individuals often choose other values and goals over their safety. Take the professional driver who runs the daily risk of fatal crashes on the race course; the young man who indulges in unprotected sex with a casual partner; the BASE jumper who illegally sneaks into an off-limits skyscraper, putting in danger both freedom and life by taking the plunge; or, in a different context, the firefighter rushing into a burning building or the soldier who engages enemy militants in a deadly firefight. Some explanations for the choice to give up security in the interest of other benefits can be found in the psychology of risk (e.g., Lopes, 1987; Weber, Blais, & Betz, 2002) and of sensation seeking (e.g., Arnett, 1994; Zuckerman, 1979); other directions point to the role that group identification may play in such choices (Brett & Specht, 2004; Stern, 1995). Our theory focuses on the interplay of competing motivations that lead to a sacrifice of personal security, and on the role of violence-justifying ideology in driving individuals to engage in risky behaviors in general and in terrorism in particular. To better understand those motivations, let us first define extremism and briefly review some psychological theories of its origins.
Radicalization and Extremism

The phenomenon of extremism is not new (Wintrobe, 2006). However, recent years have seen a surge in radical movements and organizations in various parts of the world. The past decade has witnessed significant radicalization trends in Somalia (Healy & Hill, 2010; Shay, 2010), Yemen (Healy & Hill, 2010; Terrill, 2011; Worth, 2011), Afghanistan (Khan, 2011; Rashid, 2012), Pakistan (Khan, 2011; Rashid, 2012; Schmidt, 2009), Turkey (Mincheva & Gurr, 2008; Unal, 2012), and Spain (Jordan, 2012; Sánchez-Cuenca & De la Calle, 2009); also, in Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia (among others) the so-called Arab Spring of 2010 is increasingly under threat of a takeover by extremist organizations.

Extremism is not limited to a single geographic movement, political orientation, or religion, and in different historical contexts it has appeared in a variety of guises. Although a contested term (for discussion see Hogg, Kruglanski, & Van den Bos, 2013), extremism often manifests itself as aggression, cruelty, and intentional harm directed against others. Expressed as deviation from a normative reality, or as zeal or conviction (Klein & Kruglanski, 2013), extremism has the often-realized potential of doing harm to many.

Defining Extremism

Extreme views are ones that reject alternative normative concerns and disregard opposing considerations. Killing unarmed civilians, for example, is extreme in that it contradicts the value of human lives, held sacred in most cultures and religions. It is in this sense that terrorism can be considered extreme, for it sacrifices a cherished value of protecting unarmed civilians on the altar of a cause that terrorists believe in. But other forms of extremism exist: an oppressive regime is extreme because it denies its citizens individual freedoms. To the extent, then, that individual freedoms represent a valued norm, oppression could be regarded as extreme. In the same way, religious zealotry could be considered extreme because it denies common human needs (e.g., for comfort, pleasure, possessions), and so on. In the present chapter, however, we focus on the type of extremism that finds its expression in indiscriminate political violence, often referred to as terrorism.

The Psychology of Terrorism

Although there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism (Atran, 2003; Schmidt, 2009), oft-emphasized elements are its focus on civilian and non-combatant targets of violence, the disruption of public order, and the endangerment of public security. Threatening life and limb, creating mayhem, sowing fear: terrorism’s main objective is to disrupt the safety and security of its targets. But in the process terrorists are also relinquishing their own security, in full knowledge that they may be giving up their lives to exterminate others. What is the motivation behind such a choice? Let us turn to a brief review of existing psychological literature on the topic of terrorism with particular reference to terrorists’ motivations.

Social Science of Terrorism

Social scientists have been interested in modern terrorism for the past half century, from the times (in the late 1960s and 1970s) when a surge of bombings, hijackings, and kidnappings brought the issue to the forefront of public attention. The scholarly interest in terrorism spiked at the beginning of the 21st century, with the events of 9/11/2001; the Bali bombing in 2002; the train bombings in Madrid (2004) and London (2005); the Mumbai attack in 2008; the Westgate shopping mall attack.
in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2013; and myriad other attacks ranging from murders of individual targets in Western countries to numerous suicide bombings in Iraq and in the Pakistan-Afghanistan region over the last decade. Many research efforts have been spent in attempts to understand the phenomenon, including the establishment of numerous research institutes, conferences, and publications devoted to the study of terrorism.

Major recent analyses of the terrorism phenomenon (e.g., Bloom, 2005; Pedahzur, 2005; Sageman, 2004; Stern, 2003) devote considerable attention to terrorists’ motivations. Different researchers emphasize different motivations, some focusing on a single motivation (Pape, 2005; Sageman, 2004) while others list a smorgasbord of motives (Bloom, 2005; Stern, 2003). Among these motivations are a search for emotional and social support (Sageman, 2004), resistance to foreign occupation (Pape, 2005), personal loss and trauma (Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2005), desire to reap the rewards of participating in a holy war (Hassan, 2001), and diverse other motivations, including humiliation, social status, dedication to a leader, etc. (Bloom, 2005; Stern, 2003).

These heterogeneous motivations can be classified into more general categories of ideological, personal, and social motivations. However, such a step merely taxonomizes terrorist motives but does not explain the underlying dynamics of a motivation strong enough to override personal security and basic self-preservation. A recently introduced model (Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009; Kruglanski, Belanger, et al., 2013) integrates various motivational forces and elucidates how they function interdependently within the overarching concept of the quest for significance.

**The Quest for Personal Significance**

The quest for personal significance has been hailed by psychological theorists as a major motivational force in human behavior (e.g., Frankl, 2000; Maslow, 1943). Frankl (2000) wrote, “[A person] is actualizing himself to the extent that he is forgetting himself by giving himself . . . through serving a cause higher than himself . . .” (p. 138). According to terror management theory (Becker, 1973; Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004), to address the fear imbedded in the knowledge of mortality and the implied threat of insignificance, individuals strive to attain what society deems to be worth attaining. “Doing well” in culturally prescribed ways and being a “good” member of society inoculate the individual against the fear of ending up as a meaningless non-entity. The willingness to sacrifice one’s comfort and to set aside one’s personal goals, including personal safety, for the sake of the group is the ultimate “goodness” in the eyes of self and others.

**Activating the Quest for Significance**

Like any other motivational force, the quest for significance has to be specifically activated in order for it to affect behavior (for discussion see Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007; Morsella & Bargh, 2011; Moskowitz & Grant, 2009). Motivation is driven by a dynamic of competing goals and forces, and even the most driven idealists shift their focus from attaining significance to attending to their physiological needs, engaging in self-preservation activities, and so on. According to our theory (Kruglanski, Belanger et al., 2013), the quest for significance can be awakened in three general cases: (1) significance loss, (2) the threat of loss, and (3) opportunity for significance gain. We consider these in turn.

**Significance Loss**

A loss of significance can arise under diverse circumstances, such as failure in an important pursuit or a severe humiliation of some sort; this applies to the Chechen widows who were rendered
powerless, and hence were demeaned and humiliated, by having their significant others taken from
them by the Russian forces (Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2005). Loss of significance also applies to
Muslim immigrants to Europe who experience considerable disrespect and often confront violent
“Islamophobia” on the part of members of the host community (Kruglanski, Crenshaw, Post, &
Victoroff, 2008).

Significance loss can occur at the collective level as well. Threats to the security of the group,
either real or symbolic, also result in significance loss. Abusing the group as an entity, demeaning
it, and calling the validity of its values into question all have implications for group members’
personal psychological sense of self-worth. Reminding members of the group of the dishonor
their fellow members had to suffer is a strong motivator for extreme actions, as can be evinced by
the use of such reminders in Al Qaeda propaganda tapes. Analysis of the contents of such propa-
ganda videos, which we have recently been conducting using materials provided by the SITE
Intelligence Group,1 provides multiple examples of such use. The following excerpt from a speech
made by the Emir of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Abu Musab Abdul Wadud, on May 8, 2007,
illustrates this motivational tactic:

... they stepped over your religion, soiled the book of your God, violated your honor,
ruined your ethics, robbed your wealth, humiliated and dominated you, and you have no
way out but to do jihad for the Cause of Allah the Almighty, turning to martyrdom and
the wishing for death.

The speaker combines reminders of group humiliation with increasing the salience of group
identity by conjuring vivid images of enemy violations of revered group symbols and values. As a
solution to this loss of significance at the group level, he offers a concrete course of action: willing
death in the service of the group cause. This is an example of how yearning for psychological
security, and the sense of one’s own significance embedded in shared group values and indications
for group-serving actions, can facilitate surrendering one’s physical security and can instill the
readiness to sacrifice one’s life for a cause. In a sense, the violent sacrifice becomes fused with the
group’s goals: death is not an undesirable possible outcome but is the only recourse and a thing
to yearn for.

Significance loss can also result from grievances that in themselves are unrelated to the
violence-justifying ideology. Pedahzur (2005) describes cases of Palestinian suicide bombers who
were apparently driven to their desperate activities by stigma, ostracism, and loss of self-respect
(i.e., severe significance loss) for reasons unrelated to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: the stigma of
infertility or of divorce, an accusation of an extramarital affair, an HIV diagnosis—each of these
apparently prompted individuals to sacrifice their lives for a cause that had little do with the
painful circumstances that led to their loss of significance and their fatal sense of psychological
insecurity.

**Threat of Significance Loss**

Potential failure to comply with group norms, specifically with pressures to engage in terrorism,
can create a threat of significance loss and thus ignite the quest for significance. The possibility of
failing to adhere to the values of the group introduces the fear that one may be cut off from an
important source of personal meaning and significance.

An example of such a process can be found in a recent analysis of Japanese kamikaze pilots’ let-
ters and personal diaries (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2006). Apparently, many of them valued life and were
reticent about sacrificing it; unlike Islamic shahids (holy martyrs), they expected little in the way of
a pleasure-filled paradise as a reward for dying for their cause. It appears that their sense of shame,
had they failed to “volunteer” for the suicide mission, as well as the honor and solidarity with fallen brothers-in-arms, is what prevented them from attempting to avoid their fateful assignment.

Hayashi Ichizo, a *tokkotai* pilot (kamikaze) who died on his mission on February 22, 1945, wrote in a letter to his mother two days before his final flight: “I find it so hard to leave you behind. . . . I want to be held in your arms and sleep . . . [yet] [a]ll men born in Japan are destined to die fighting for the country. You have done a splendid job raising me to become a honorable man . . .” (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2006, p. 173).

**Significance Gain**

Significance loss, whether potential or actual, is not the only circumstance in which the quest for significance is aroused. An opportunity for *significance gain* is another important avenue for awakening this need. In a recent analysis of 19th-century Russian anarchists, McCauley and Moskalenko (2011) discuss the “risk and status” mechanism of radicalization illustrated by the story of Alexander Barannikov, member of the terrorist “People’s Will” (Narodnaya Volya) organization. According to those who knew him, Barannikov was attracted to terrorism by the opportunity for bravado, courage, and daring that, when displayed in service of the group causes, promised a considerable boost to his status and self-esteem in the eyes of his comrades. In other words, the inherent danger in the radical pursuit of the group goals might have caused him to feel more psychologically secure of his status within that group.

In a similar vein, Sprinzak (2001) discussed what he termed the “megalomaniacal hyper-terrorists”: the likes of Ramzi Yousef (the man behind the 1993 World Trade Center bombing), Shoko Asahara (leader of Aum Shinrikyo and architect of the 1995 sarin gas attack in a Tokyo subway station), Timothy McVeigh (the 1995 Oklahoma City bomber), and Osama bin Laden. Sprinzak described them as “self-anointed individuals with larger-than-life callings . . . and with insatiable urge to use catastrophic attacks in order to write a new chapter in history . . .” (p. 73).

The process described above and the supporting examples bear some resemblance to ideas presented in relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976, 1982; Folger & Martin, 1986; Gurr, 1970; Runciman, 1966; for a review, see also Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012). According to this theory, perceiving the ingroup to be at an unfair disadvantage in comparison with others will lead the comparing individual to experience discontent, anger, grievance, moral outrage, or resentment. When the ingroup is perceived to have a potentially bright future, parallel to a potential significance gain, but such a future is not as accessible as it is to outgroups, the unfavorable comparison and the ensuing sense of collective relative deprivation can lead to outcomes such as readiness to approve of violent politics or civil disobedience (e.g., Issac, Mutran, & Stryker, 1980). Relative deprivation is assumed to be at the basis of Moghaddam’s “staircase to terrorism” (2005), which sees certain individuals as attempting to climb from perceived injustice and deprivation in search of opportunities (again, parallel to potential significance gain) but ending up as radical militants capable of terrorist acts.

The goal of significance gain via terrorism and martyrdom can be introduced early in the socialization process, that is, can be “bred in the bone” (Post, 2006). An example of this can be found in the Hezbollah Shi’ite youth movement Imam al-Mahdi Scouts, which has tens of thousands of members aged 8–16. According to the Egyptian daily *Ruz Al-Yusuf* (of August 18, 2006), the young members are trained to be “willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of Allah (awlad istishhadiyyun)” (Al-Hakim, 2006). Nor is Hezbollah unique in this tactic of indoctrinating young children into martyrdom and heroism on behalf of their group. The youth camps operated by the Hamas movement include extremist Islamic indoctrination and paramilitary training, as well as social activities, all geared toward creating a large pool of future recruits to the ranks of Hamas militants.
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These socialization efforts parallel similar patterns of influence occurring in non-militant contexts such as youth movements (e.g., Amon, Shamai, & Ilatov, 2008; Mechling, 2004) and religious institutions such as Sunday schools (e.g., Collins-Mayo, 2010; Sherkat, 2003); the difference is, however, that in the case of terrorist organizations, the normal process of youth socialization is harnessed in the service of a violent ideology to raise the next generation of potential radical militants. Psychologically, then, ingraining heroic themes in children represents a terrorist organization’s attempt to create an opportunity for immense significance gain in the youngsters’ eyes; through participation in the fight for the common cause, they are raised to expect a considerable significance gain by realizing the group’s most cherished values and attaining its most important goals.

Thus far, we have discussed three broad types of events that can arouse the quest for significance. But once aroused, how and when does this quest override opposing motivational forces, including the basic need for security? To address this question we now turn to the topic of motivational exclusivity.

Motivational Exclusivity

Basic motivational research in psychology shows that when one’s commitment to a given goal is enhanced, alternative goals are inhibited and suppressed (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002). In this way, increased commitment to a significance quest may expel from one’s mind other goals in the safety/personal security category. Whereas Maslow’s (1943) theory suggests that satisfaction of the baser (physiological, safety) needs is a precondition for activation of the higher needs (love, esteem, self-actualization), our theory suggests that the opposite may also occur and that activation of the higher-order needs may lead to actual suppression of the more basic needs occupying lower rungs in the motivational hierarchy. Consider the following testimony of a former Black Tamil Tiger, member of the prestigious suicide squads operated in Sri Lanka by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (quoted in Kruglanski, Belanger, et al., 2013, p. 564):

Family and relationships are forgotten in that place. There was no place for love. . . . That means a passion and loyalty to that group, to those in charge, to those who sacrificed their lives for the group. Then I came to a stage where I had no love for myself. I had no value for my life. I was ready to give myself fully, even to destroy myself, in order to destroy another person.

Similarly, research by Scott Atran, Jeremy Ginges, and their colleagues suggests that individuals who have become radicalized to jihad are unlikely to abandon extreme violence against the enemy even in order to save a whole family or village from annihilation. Ginges and Atran (2009) report that in a representative survey conducted among 1260 Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza in December 2005 to January 2006, 43% of respondents who believed that Islam allows a bomber to kill himself with the aim of killing his enemy also rejected postponement or cancellation of such a bombing attack if such an attack led to the destruction and killing of friends and neighbors in retaliation.

We see, then, that when the motivation for personal significance is at the forefront, other goals and considerations, including the safety of self and close others, recede to the background and diminish in importance. Still, for individuals to be willing to trade personal security for group approbation and a sense of personal significance, two additional factors must combine with the quest for significance: a terrorism-justifying ideology that identifies the means to the end of significance, and a change in focus from individual to collective consciousness. The nexus of these three elements presents itself as a chance for great significance gain or a potential for considerable
significance loss, should one fail to rise to the challenge. In this connection, we will address the two interrelated additional elements required to turn the quest for significance into violent radicalization: ideology and collectivistic shift.

The Role of Ideology

The motivation of (re)gaining one’s sense of significance, however powerful, does not in itself drive people into action. What must one do to make a difference, to be worthy of esteem in the eyes of one’s society? Ideology provides answers to these questions. It defines what is worthwhile, moral, and admirable, what constitutes the “good life” one ought to aspire to, and what behavior it behooves individuals to perform in any given circumstances.

According to our theory, it is ideology that provides the means to the goal of personal significance: it indicates what the individual should do to attain this goal (Kruglanski, Belanger, et al., 2013). An ideology is a collective belief system, grounded in the group’s shared reality, to which an individual subscribes. While the ideology may set its own goals (for example, setting up an independent Tamil nation, establishing a caliphate), it ultimately provides a means to achieving personal significance. Threat to the group, either objective or subjective, activates the ideology in such a way that group defense is construed as a pre-eminent task, for which glory is the reward. Therefore, ideology is relevant to radicalization by identifying terrorism as a means to personal significance and justifying it on moral and instrumental grounds. These functions are assumed to be common to any terrorism-justifying ideology, whether it be an ethno-nationalist ideology, a socialist ideology, or a religious ideology.

Ideological Structure

A terrorism-justifying ideology typically comprises three elements: a grievance (injustice) perpetrated toward one’s group (religious, national, ethnic, gender related, etc.), a culprit portrayed as responsible for the injustice, and a morally warranted and effective (hence, significance-promoting) method of removing the dishonor created by the injustice, namely terrorism, for which the perpetrator is accorded respect and admiration from the group. An ideology that justifies its adherents’ actions, even a bare-bones or simplistic one, is a necessity for terrorist behavior to follow; it provides the rationale behind terrorists’ actions and choices, without which intelligible conduct is impossible.

The role of ideology is particularly important in the case of suicide bombers, whose ability to enjoy the rewards of self-sacrifice is limited by the nature of their contemplated deed. Kruglanski et al. (2009) analyzed the contents of farewell videos from suicide terrorists and interviews with mothers of successful suicide bombers in order to identify the motives they implied for carrying out suicide missions and engaging in terrorist attacks. The statements made by suicide bombers and their parents include key phrases like “jihad”, “fulfill duty”, and “in Allah’s cause”, suggesting that the motivation underlying their acts was ideologically based.

In an analysis of a farewell video recorded by three Hamas soldiers before a planned (and ultimately thwarted) suicide mission, Oliver and Steinberg (2005) similarly found a prevalence of ideological statements; for example, one of the speakers stated that the martyr’s mission was to “present our spirits and make our blood cheap for the sake of Allah and out of love for this homeland and for the sake of the freedom and honor of this people in order that Palestine remain Islamic, and Hamas remain a torch lighting the road of all the perplexed and all the tormented and the oppressed, and Palestine be liberated” (p. 120). These findings support our argument regarding the pivotal role ideology plays in leading individuals who are searching for personal significance to choose violent, extreme means to reach that goal.
Collectivistic Shift

Our theory remains incomplete without another psychological element related to radicalization that we refer to as a collectivistic shift. The grievance or hurt is first to occur, the circumstance that awakens the quest for significance; but the turn from individual means of achieving the goal to a group-based or collectivistic avenue for significance restoration is an essential link in the trajectory leading to terrorism. It is often beyond the power of the individual to regain her or his lost sense of personal significance: it is impossible to bring back to life the loved ones lost to enemy violence, and sometimes near-impossible to undo the deeds that brought on ostracism from one’s community or to convince members of an indigenous majority to accept a minority immigrant as equal. But changing the frame of reference from a personal to a collective one, as often occurs in the wake of hurtful personal events, may provide a resolution on a different level. In other words, where the direct restoration of one’s lost sense of personal significance seems impossible, the individual may try to achieve this goal indirectly through alternative means, including an identification with a collective loss (or one’s group’s relative deprivation) that provides a clear path to renewed significance via participation in militancy and terrorism (Kruglanski et al., 2009).

The collectivistic shift resulting from awakening the significance goal has two immediate consequences: (1) the empowerment effect of feeling part of a larger, stronger entity, increasing one’s sense of psychological security; and (2) the sacrifice effect, the normatively based readiness to act on the group’s behalf no matter the price. In combination with terrorism-justifying group ideology, the collectivistic shift resulting from significance loss may lead to the support of violence/martyrdom on the group’s behalf.

Empirical Evidence

Evidence has been emerging lately that is consistent with the foregoing theoretical assertions. One piece of the puzzle, the idea that loss of significance (e.g., because of personal failure or humiliation) leads to a collectivistic shift (an increased attunement to the ingroup and its values), received support in a recent survey of 12 Arab countries, Pakistan, and Indonesia, conducted by Maryland’s START center (the National Center for the Study of Terrorism and the Response to Terrorism); this research showed that participants reporting lower life success, hence presumably suffering a significance loss, tend to self-identify more strongly as members of collectivities (nation or religion) rather than as individuals (Kruglanski, Gelfand, & Gunaratna, 2013).

This proposition was also supported by the results of several experimental studies carried out at the University of Maryland (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011). In one experiment, participants wrote an essay describing their experience of personal failure or of personal success. Subsequently, their national identification as Americans was assessed. As expected, participants in the failure condition reported significantly stronger identification with their nation than participants in the success condition.

In another experiment (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011), participants were given positive (success) or negative (failure) feedback for their performance on a task, and their interdependent self-construal was assessed via the Singelis (1994) scale. As expected, participants in the negative feedback condition professed a more interdependent self-construal than participants in the positive feedback condition.

In a subsequent study (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011), participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: in one condition they were asked to describe in writing a time in their past when they succeeded in achieving an important personal goal; in another condition they were asked to write about a time in the past when they failed to achieve such a goal. Participants then completed self-report measures of independent and interdependent self-construal (Singelis, 1994).
Consistent with the results of the former study, participants in the failure condition exhibited significantly higher scores on the interdependence scale and also significantly lower scores on the independence scale than participants in the success condition.

In another study in the series, participants first engaged in a video game on the computer. They were told that their performance on this task had been demonstrated to be a reliable predictor of their intelligence and future life success. The video game was designed so that participants were randomly assigned to either succeed or fail at the task. Subsequently, they were told that they would engage in another task with the chance to win a reward and were offered the choice between working alone on the task or working in a group. Participants in the success condition were significantly less likely to elect to work in a group than were participants in the failure condition. Thus, these results indicate that failure not only shifts individuals’ mindset from an independent way of thinking to an interdependent way of thinking but also fuels efforts to engage in collective action.

Another element of the theory posits that the collectivistic shift has an effect of empowerment. And, indeed, there is mounting evidence that activating or making salient one’s collective identity reduces one’s fear of death, which, according to terror management theorists (Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Simon, 1997; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994) as well as philosophers like Becker (1962) and Rousseau (1762/1968), represents anxiety about non-existence—arguably the ultimate form of insignificance. In a series of studies (Orehek, Sasota, Kruglanski, Ridgeway, & Dechesne, 2014), increasing participants’ collectivistic versus individualistic orientations led to a decrease in death anxiety and death avoidance. Using a variety of manipulations, and both explicit and implicit measures of participants’ fear of death, these studies present converging evidence for the notion that a collectivistic, group-oriented frame of mind leads to a reduction in death anxiety. In other words, it bestows a group-based sense of psychological security.

Activation of a collective identity may result not only in a reduction in fear of death but also in a greater readiness to sacrifice personal security on behalf of the group. In research referred to above (Orehek et al., 2014, study 5), participants primed with plural (versus singular) pronouns expressed greater readiness to sacrifice their lives (throw themselves in front of a trolley to save others in a hypothetical scenario) for fellow group members, though not for strangers. Findings pointing in a similar direction were reported by Swann and colleagues (Swann, Gomez, Dovidio, Hart, & Jetten, 2010), who conducted several studies in which individuals who were more (vs. less) “fused” with their group were more willing to sacrifice themselves (in a trolley scenario) for the sake of the group, to endorse fighting for the group, to donate money for a group cause, and to put more effort into performance on the group’s behalf. Finally, the willingness to fight and make sacrifices on the group’s behalf includes the readiness to engage in terrorism. A recent Internet survey conducted in 12 Arab countries, Indonesia, and Pakistan and representative face-to-face research interviews in Egypt, Morocco, Indonesia, and Pakistan showed that individuals who self-identified in a collectivistic manner (as members of their religion or their nation) rather than as individuals tended to support the killing of American civilians more strongly (Kruglanski, Gelfand, et al., 2012).

The final piece of evidence relevant to the quest for significance theory is the link between loss of significance and support for violent action, including action involving sacrifices and risks to personal security. If personal loss of significance leads to a collectivistic shift, and if this encourages individuals to fight and make sacrifices on the group’s behalf, then it follows that suffering a loss of significance should increase one’s tendency to fight and undertake sacrifices for the group, including the sacrifice of personal security. Several of our recent findings support that idea (Kruglanski, Belanger, et al., 2013). In a recent survey conducted with detained former members of the Sri Lankan terrorist organization the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, we found that (1) the degree
to which they felt anger in the last few weeks, (2) the degree to which they felt shame in the last few weeks, and (3) the frequency of their feeling insignificant were all significantly correlated with their support for violent struggle against the Singhalese majority. These findings suggest that a loss of significance may prompt support for violence on one’s group’s behalf.

A loss of significance can occur in various ways, including a failure to adhere to group norms and values: in traditional cultures, one example of such failure is entertaining sinful thoughts with sexual content, forbidden by religion. According to our theory, the arousal of such thoughts may enhance support for sacrifice and martyrdom in the service of one’s group, in an attempt to restore lost significance. In a recent experimental attempt to test this idea, religious participants were exposed to sexual stimuli assumed to arouse forbidden thoughts and therefore sexual guilt. After completing an intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity scale (Allport & Ross, 1967), participants looked at sexual stimuli or neutral stimuli, and their sexual guilt was measured via the Revised Mosher Sexual Guilt Inventory (Mosher, 1987). Their support for martyrdom for an (undefined) social cause was then assessed, including items such as “Under the right circumstances, I would sacrifice my life for an important cause” and “I would be willing to renounce all my personal wealth for a highly important cause.” Participants who were exposed to sexual stimuli and who were intrinsically religious exhibited greater sexual guilt and greater support for martyrdom. Finally, in the sexual stimuli condition the relation between intrinsic religiosity and support for martyrdom was mediated by sexual guilt (our proxy of significance loss), lending support to our theoretical prediction.

Conclusions

In his influential work on motivation, Maslow (1943) wrote, “The tendency to have some religion or world-philosophy that organizes the universe and the men in it into some sort of satisfactorily coherent, meaningful whole is also in part motivated by safety-seeking” (p. 379). In a similar vein, we argued that the willingness to trade physical safety for more intangible forms of security—a sense of being secure in one’s social status, approval of the group, a sense of culturally sanctioned worth and meaning—plays a crucial role in radicalization and terrorism.

In broad terms, we can describe three components that lead people to engage in radically violent acts: (1) a symbolic or actual threat, which is experienced as a danger to the individual’s sense of meaning and self-significance; (2) an ideology that utilizes the threat as a valid reason to engage in violent ideologically prescribed threat responses; and (3) collectivistic shift, or self-categorization processes that facilitate the internalization and implementation of a group norm-based solution to threat; these processes reduce the salience of competing goals, such as personal security and physical survival.

Emerging empirical evidence supports the model, which suggests that the fundamental motivation of achieving a sense of personal significance is a driving force behind individuals’ willingness to sacrifice themselves and others in the service of violence-justifying ideology. Ironically, it is the attempt to restore psychological security through the fulfillment of culturally approved goals and values that can lead to the ultimate sacrifice of safety, security, and life itself.

Notes

1 The Search for International Terrorist Entities (SITE) Intelligence Group is an organization that tracks the online activity of terrorist organizations (http://news.siteintelgroup.com/). The SITE team monitors the Internet and traditional media for material and propaganda released by jihadist groups and their supporters, and provides translation and analysis services.

2 A threat will endanger one’s sense of self-significance to the degree that it pertains to central (vs. peripheral) self-identity. For instance, if for individual A the trait of courage was more central than the trait of intelligence, whereas for individual B the trait of intelligence was the more important of the two, then
for the former individual a failure of courage would represent a greater loss of significance than a failure of intelligence, whereas for the latter individual a failure of intelligence would represent a greater loss of significance.

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Secure in Their Beliefs


