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# Applying Psychological Theories of Personality, Identity, and Intergroup Conflict to Radical Violence: A Case Study of Extremist Behavior

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Claremont McKenna College

**Applying Psychological Theories of Personality, Identity, and  
Intergroup Conflict to Radical Violence: A Case Study of  
Extremist Behavior**

Submitted to  
Professor William Ascher

By  
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For  
Senior Thesis  
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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to address possible psychoanalytical explanations for the heinous acts in which terrorists, particularly ISIS, engage. It focuses on Harold D. Lasswell's principles of the id, ego, and superego as well as Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory. Within the framework of these two theories, relevant psychological and social psychological theories are discussed in order to explore a possible connection between the psyche of violent perpetrators and their actions. By exploring these connections, I find that there may be more nuanced psychological explanations for these violent acts, which could lead to new methods of weakening perceived biases, intergroup conflicts, and extremist behavior.

## **Introduction**

Many see terrorism in an instant: the explosion of a bomb, an airplane hijacking, or a bus ramming. These events dominate the news cycle and characterize groups like Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram as dangerous extremists. Media play directly into the terrorist's scheme in depicting them as brutish, radical, and willing to go to extremes to further a cause. However, many fail to look beyond the immediate release of decapitation videos or the headline of over 200 school girls being kidnapped. The puzzle behind these events is not the mechanics; how extremist groups physically carry out terror is obvious. The puzzle lies in how an individual is able to execute such horrendous acts, since it runs counter to what most understand to be ethical human behavior.

Killing others violates, except in self-defense, contemporary social conventions about right and wrong. It is right to help a neighbor in need; it is wrong to kill another human being. How can an ethical human inflict such brute violence onto another human being?

These rights and wrongs stem back to the Ten Commandments during the Late Antique era and other ancient ethical standards of other cultures. However, contrary to the commandment "Thou shall not kill", tolerance for killing other human beings was commonplace until recently. Throughout time, empires ravaged territories in conquests, public executions were accepted, and religious warfare was justified. Common to these instances of murder is that each were justified by a purpose; each victim was deserving in the eyes of the perpetrator – the objective of an empire was to expand, one was publicly executed because one was guilty of violating societal norms, and religious bloodshed was justified by God. The moral code that opposes the killing of others outside of state vs. state

wars continuously arose since the Enlightenment. Demonstratively, the reactions to the appalling Nazi actions reinforced this code. Though Hitler and the Nazi party presented a justification and mission for the systematic murder of Jews and others, the international community deemed these actions wrong and unjust.

Perpetrators of terrorism undermine their own cause by engaging in such violent acts that create stereotypes of the social, religious, or political group. Today, there are not only immediate consequences of destruction during a terrorist attack, but broader social, economic, and political ramifications associated with such acts. It is extraordinarily strange behavior for someone to engage in, since it causes harm to ingroup members. The most prevalent example of this is the rise of Islamophobia. The extremists of such groups that claim to be of Islamic faith are responsible for hardships the broader Muslim community is facing. They have created an environment in which the followers of the Islamic faith are vilified in the Western world. Thus, although the extremists represent a minority of Muslims, their actions negatively affect the majority.

This presents the paradox: why would Islamic extremists perform acts of terror if many others believe that it so negatively affects the broader Muslim community? Though anti-Muslim sentiment was prevalent before 9/11, instances of anti-Muslim hate crimes, discrimination, fear, and racial profiling have since skyrocketed. In 2016, an Imam and his assistant were gunned down in front of their mosque (Melendez, Pilar, and Ray Sanchez). A 60-year-old Muslim woman was fatally stabbed on her walk home (CBS New York). A 2015 survey reported that 55 percent of Muslim children experienced some type of bullying in school due to their faith (Islamic Networks Group). A Muslim congressman has received death threats (CNN Video).



This thesis will examine multiple theories that address human violence and intergroup conflict in the context of extremist Islam. Determining a relationship, then, among the theories may be useful in formulating counter strategies. The foundational theories will be Lasswell's take on Freud's tri-part division of personality – the id, ego, and superego – as well as Tajfel's social identity theory. Illuminating a possible correspondence between these two may help to provide an explanation as to why and how the consciences of extremists allow them to engage in heinous acts.

No single theory can account for all terrorist acts. Thus, counter strategies may differ on a case-by-case basis. However, it will be useful to create a framework for analyzing the dynamics behind an act of terror to more easily determine an appropriate response, as well as prevent future violence.

## Theories

To develop methods of lessening intergroup conflict, resentment and stereotyping, it is first important to review the relevant psychological theories that pertain to violent and possibly morally abnormal behavior. Insofar as these theories hold, their claims may prove pertinent when considering the psychological processes that may, at least partially, account for the seemingly outlandish and heinous acts of extremists. If their actions can be partially attributed to psychological reasoning, then the understanding of that reason may provide opportunity to combat the processes and deter such conflict.

### Triple-Appeal Principle

The triple-appeal principle is a psychological model, based on the Freudian divisions of personality: id, ego, and superego to explain different psychological reactions to appeals espoused from varied deliberate persuasive efforts. Lasswell (1932, 523) states, “the id may be said to correspond with impulses, the superego with conscience, and the ego with reason”. An appeal can be issued from three sources: a person, institution, or occasion. Entities may attempt to appeal to their audience’s id, ego, superego, or some combination. The division or divisions in which the target of appeal is, may be a deliberate choice.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example, if a mother praises her child for making his or her bed in the morning with a hug, then the child will feel emotionally good about making the bed. This is an appeal to the id. If the mother gives the child five dollars for making the bed, then the child will be motivated to repeat the act because of the money; this appeals to the ego. It could be

Lasswell (1932, 533) categorizes institutional appeals in this way: “The appeal to expediency [ego] is predominant in economic, political, scientific, and technological institutions; the appeal to conscious [superego] is that of religion and fundamental law; the appeal to natural impulse [id] is that of art and sociability [brackets inserted]”. Nevertheless, this is not a definitive categorization, since institutions, like political ones, may also appeal to the id or superego.<sup>2</sup> A person, institution, or occasion may be able to simultaneously appeal to the id, ego, and superego. Hence, individuals may deliberately appeal to one division, or multiple, if they think that it will advance a specific objective.

The appeal of an occasion, however, is most important to analyzing violent acts. An act is an occasion – the chopping off of a head, the flying of planes into towers, or bombing a subway, are all acts meant to evoke emotion; to appeal to the id. Violent acts are meant to arouse fear and anger from the outgroup.

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assumed that a mother would want her child to make his or her bed because that is the responsible thing to do and feel good about it, rather than for mere monetary gain. Thus, the appeal to the superego is more effective to achieve the goal of increasing responsibility. If the goal was just for the task to be done, then the appeal to the ego may be more effective.

<sup>2</sup> For example, military recruitment videos of strong individuals climbing ropes, driving tanks, and protecting their families is appealing to one’s id – emotion; while the patriotic call for duty appeals to the superego – conscious – as a moral act. Thus, a combination of appeals is used from the government, which is clearly a political institution.

According to Lasswell (1932, 531), these acts may occur because accepted social norms and adherence to moral codes has repressed raw impulses of the id (aroused by the original occasion); however, the destructive urge of the id does not fade away. Rather, the impulse may be directed upon substitute targets. Hence, “whenever there is a striking lack of proportion between an act and the reasons alleged for it, there is a presumption that some unconscious impulses are involved in the acts” (Lasswell 1932, 526). Likewise, Leon Festinger (1962, 98) touches on the instance of repressed raw impulses in his theory of cognitive dissonance:

Imagine the psychological situation that exists for an individual who is tempted to engage in a certain action but for some reason or another refrains... All the pressures, reasons and justifications for refraining are consonant with his actual behavior. Nevertheless, the dissonance [which is equivalent to the id in this context] does exist, and there will be psychological activity oriented toward reducing this dissonance.

A breach of societal norms or a threat to the group with which one identifies, stimulates the repressed id. This leads to an increased chance of one acting on raw impulses without reason of the ego or inhibition of the superego. There is a “crisis of conscious” between raw impulse and social inhibition when one’s environment equilibrium feels threatened, and often, the discomfort fostered by this tension leads to an overpowering of the id (Lasswell 1932, 537).

### Vicarious Retribution

This part of Lasswell's analysis can be directly related to Lickel et al.'s theory of vicarious retribution. Lickel et al. provide a framework for understanding how blame is ascribed to the outgroup; once an act occurs that has been personally offensive or has offended a fellow ingroup member, then the attribution of traits of the perpetrator is generalized to the entire outgroup, since the original perpetrator may be unavailable or the outgroup is perceived to be coherent and alike (Lickel et al. 2006, 312). Existence of generalized blame is not new or uncommon.<sup>3</sup> Thus, even though the outgroup target may not be directly responsible for acts in which the ingroup perpetrator is avenging, the outgroup individual is held accountable. However, social inhibitions regarding what is morally acceptable prevent rampant intergroup violence from occurring; yet, there are instances when the inhibited id acts out – this is when a violent act may materialize. Individuals first attempt to make sense of the act that was offensive to themselves or their group, and then rationalize who is to blame. In this model, the blame lands on any one individual of the outgroup with whom the original perpetrator is identified.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, loyal Republicans in the deep South of the United States often vicariously attribute extreme leftist traits to all those who identify as Democrats, regardless of the degree to which the individuals beliefs are leftist. Likewise, a Democrat from the reliably blue Pacific Northwest may assume extreme rightist Republican traits of anyone from the South. However, just because Democrats and Republicans may hold these perceptions of the other, does not commonly mean that they are going to inflict acts of violence upon one another.

Group identification and perceived outgroup entitativity<sup>4</sup> are the main factors that influence the possibility of vicarious retribution. Group identification plays a role in the likelihood of vicarious retribution; the stronger an individual identifies with a group, the higher likelihood one is to act on behalf of the given group. Lickel et al. (2006, 377) claim that “identification increases a sense of anger and influences the motivation for vicarious retribution because of its links to *group pride* and *empathy for harmed ingroup members*” [italics in the original]. Thus, these are the two factors that influence an individual’s strength of identification; however, social norms are a third way that may also promote a heightened sense of identification, since they “not only define what is morally appropriate; but may also represent an expected standard of behavior” (Lickel et al. 2006, 377).

Group identification is one basis for such acts, while perceived group entitativity explains the target – “why people would be motivated to take revenge against someone other than the perpetrator” (Lickel et al. 2006, 378). The retribution is spread across outgroup members for two main reasons: unavailability of original perpetrator and perceived united, coherent outgroup, which leads to the perception that “blameworthy qualities are shared” among the entire outgroup.

The step Lickel et al. are missing is from attributing generalized traits of the outgroup to violent episodes; it is to account for the id, ego, or superego that Lasswell discusses. Lasswell’s analysis of the division of personality may help to fill this gap. Once

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<sup>4</sup> “Entitativity (Campbell, 1958) is the perception that a group is a unified and coherent whole in which the members are perceived to be bonded together in some way” (Lickel et al. 2006, 378).

the attributes are generalized to a group, the repressed raw impulse is stimulated and there is opportunity for violence to occur. The initial act, like the historical fall of the caliphate, provides this opportunity to trigger raw impulse.

Lickel et al. do not give attention to “affective” – acting out of raw impulse – vs. “instrumental” aggression – acting due to a sense of justification. However, the former may be associated with the id – acting out of emotion and raw impulse – while the latter may stem from the ego, superego, or both. One shortcoming of Lickel et al.’s framework, then, may be that they do not dedicate much attention to the instrumental reasons. Instead, they state that “we are interested in charting the cognitive and motivational processes that give rise to support for retaliation against the outgroup” (Lickel et al. 2006, 375). Hence, they neglect the possibility of the role instrumental reasons (i.e. the ego and superego) may play when interacting with the id. Instead, they focus on affective reasons that explain the id fueling affective aggression. However, there may be a connection between instrumental aggression and the other two divisions of personality, the ego and superego, which Lickel et al. do not explore.

Nevertheless, aggression is often a combination of all three divisions, rather than either being solely affective or instrumental. For example, the attack on an ingroup member may arouse raw impulses to retaliate, but social inhibitions typically prohibit one from acting upon those impulses. However, instrumental aggression becomes relevant when the offended ingroup members can provide a justification for the raw impulses they are feeling. Thus, not only will they act on an impulse, but will also believe that the impulse is justified due to institutional appeals to the ego and superego. Appeals are frequently most powerful when they dovetail with one another in this way.

### Displacement Hypothesis

Harold D. Lasswell developed the psychological hypothesis of displacement, arguably his “most direct and prominent application of psychoanalytic theory” (Ascher 2005, 22). It dictates that an individual may displace his or her discomfort onto a more remote object, even if the source of the discomfort is in reachable proximity. Ascher (2005, 22) further specifies that “In some instances, these displacements may occur without conscious awareness of the connection between the original and the resulting impulses or affects”. Thus, the rationalization for these impulses may only be identifiable by a third party, rather than individual self-awareness. The unconscious unawareness is where Lasswell incorporates the Freudian theory of the id, ego, and superego. Accordingly, “the displacement hypothesis invokes Freudian dynamics by positing that certain thoughts or emotions are so painful, threatening, or overwhelming that the individual will repress them, and redirect them onto more remote or otherwise less potent objects” (Ascher 2005, 22). Hence, the superego then rationalizes the displaced behavior.

Lasswell formulated this theory in the terms  $p \} d \} r = p$  where “private motives (p) are displaced (d) onto public objects, and then rationalized (r) in terms of the public interest” (Lasswell 1930/1960, 75). Thus, the private motives are equivalent to id impulses and the rationalization is a result of the superego. Further, this rationalization is in accordance with the individual’s belief system (Ascher 2005, 23).

Displacement occurs if individuals feels as though they cannot act out against the source because of their proximity to the source. For example, if one resents his or her father, the individual may not feel as though he or she can retaliate against the father due to the



personal connection. According to the displacement hypothesis, this individual may instead resent all other men matching the characteristics of his or her father.

Resenting remote objects leads to stereotyping. Since one has a father that is resent worthy, then all father figures are worthy of resentment, regardless of the actual characteristics of the remote fatherly men. No individual can be certain of the characteristics or beliefs another stranger holds, however, the simplification of attributes ascribed to a group of others is how stereotypes perpetuate and perceived entitativity strengthens.

Stereotypes are dialectic; the same presumed attribute may be positive or negative based on the circumstance. For example, consider a generalization that Armenians are clever. When an Armenian is in an academic setting, a superior may assume that the individual is smart and insightful due to his or her cleverness. Contrarily, a peer holding this stereotype may be reluctant to share work with the Armenian because he or she may think that the individual will use cleverness to take advantage of the work. Thus, the impact of an attributed stereotype wholly depends on the context in which it is being applied.

Similar to displacing one's resentment of a proximate object, one may displace his or her own negative self-assessment onto remote objects; justifying his or her own insecurities in finding the wrongs of others beliefs or customs. Lasswell illustrates this element of the displacement hypothesis that is accounting "for attitudes toward public objects that originate in attitudes toward other public objects [*italics in original*] (Ascher 2005, 25), in his view of anti-Semitism by the Germans:

Plainly the Jew was available as the symbol which more than any other could be utilized as a target of irrelevant emotional drives. The hatred of the country for the

city, of aristocracy for the plutocracy, of the middle class for the manual toilers and the aristocracy for the plutocracy could be displaced upon the Jews (Lasswell 1936b/1958, 45).

German society felt shame for straying from tradition and its arising progressive culture. However, the Jews were exacerbating this avant-garde behavior. Thus, the Jewish community was used as a scapegoat to justify the Germans own insecurities surrounding their evolving societal tendencies.

Another example of displaced negative self-assessment, more relevant to this thesis, surrounds a pious Muslim man experiencing inner urges to sleep with an unveiled woman. Though the man desires to act upon his id desire, he is inhibited by the superego that is his religious beliefs. Ascher supports, “perhaps the original impulses are unacceptable in light of the individual’s need to be upstanding and worthy of self-respect and the respect of others [in his religious community]” (2005, 26). Since he cannot piously indulge with the unveiled woman, perhaps, in his mind, no man should. Thus, any man who does sleep with unveiled women, regardless of his or her beliefs, is stereotyped by this man as piously inferior; since, the Muslim man is resisting his urges, then other men must not be, and therefore are worthy of resentment, punishment, and inferiority.

In this scenario, there are two elements of the id. First is an aggressive urge to sleep with the unveiled woman. Second is the moral indignation described above, but this is satisfied by resenting the man who does indulge; the superego reaction to the id of the Muslim man leads to moral indignation against those who do indulge for being ‘wrongdoers’. However, the aggression impulse of the id is not satisfied, and this is where violence may emerge if superego social inhibitions are overpowered.

### Cognitive Dissonance

Leon Festinger's (1962, 94) theory of cognitive dissonance is founded on the terms *dissonance* – feelings of discomfort when one's existing expectations are disrupted or not met – and *consonance* – when there is no discomfort in an individual's psychological state. Festinger (1962, 93) states that “this theory centers around the idea that if a person knows various things that are not psychologically consistent with one another, he will, in a variety of ways, try to make them more consistent”. Thus, individuals will often try to make sense of, and come to terms with, behaviors, feelings, or opinions that are not originally consistent with their own.

In human behavior, individuals seek consistency and positive levels of self-esteem. Hence, their attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and codes tend to be consistent with themselves and their identities (Festinger, 1957, 1). Thus, humans will engage in actions that they believe will reduce feelings of dissonance or inconsistency. To discuss instances of cognitive dissonance and ways to dispel that dissonance, Festinger focuses on three different types of situations: decision making, lying, and temptation. For the purpose of this thesis, his analysis on decision making is most relevant.

A decision to act out violently may be based on the rejection of beliefs that violence, in the given context, is immoral, or that the intended victim is not culpable. When cognitive dissonance takes place, the impulse fueling the violence is supported by the belief that it is socially acceptable. Typically, violence is not socially accepted, and therefore destructive id impulses are inhibited, as Lasswell addresses in discussing social inhibitions. However, Festinger says the typical social denouncement of violence that is inhibitory of acting upon raw impulse may be rejected. Instead, rigidified belief structures may reinforce the

rejection of the social norm, like the establishment of a caliphate, or a “just war”. Thus, “changes in terms of information that produce or restore consistency are referred to as dissonance-reducing changes” (1962, 93).

According to Festinger, there are two ways to dispel dissonance. First, to “persuade himself that the attractive features of the rejected alternative [the non-violent option] are not really so attractive” (Festinger 1962). Perpetrators may rationalize their decision to be violent by persuading themselves that violence is a more attractive course of action for x, y, and z reasons than doing nothing but sit on the repressed dissonance and id impulses. Second, is to exaggerate the attractive features of the decision made (the possibly violent option), thus further justifying an action or decision, and convincing oneself that it will restore consonance. Finally, dissonance can only be reduced after a decision is made and the outcome is clear. Then, the restoration of consonance and justification for a decision can begin.

There may be instances where dissonance is not easily dispelled, and thus the drive to restore consonance is repressed. This is comparable to Lasswell’s repressed raw impulses of the id. The dissonance is repressed by the pressure of consonance, like the id may be repressed by social inhibitions. Eventually, raw impulses and feelings of dissonance may no longer be tolerable, resulting in acts driven by id and feelings of dissonance. The theory is that the greater the level of dissonance, which builds the longer it is repressed, the greater the urge to reduce it becomes.

The perpetuation of intergroup violence through the rejection of anti-violence appeals, or evidence of innocence, is fueled by the continuous efforts to maintain consonance. Festinger confirms this by claiming that “what would produce dissonance for

one person might produce consonance for another” (1962, 94). Likewise, groups may not share norms or interpretations of reality, which also supports the perpetuation of violence between two groups.

Another, often more dramatic, way of reducing dissonance is for one to completely alter one’s opinions and beliefs to create consonance – change the viewpoint that was dissonant. This may be more directly applied to the process of recruitment to a group when individuals do not see their views aligning with the expectation of their current social surroundings. Hence, they may search for a group in which their dissonance is considered consonant. A group may try to recruit by appealing to feelings of repressed id and dissonance (Festinger 1957, 177).<sup>5</sup> Thus, groups like ISIS appeal to these dissonances and attempt to illustrate its own community as an outlet for the discomfort created in the outgroup.

Lastly, Festinger also believes that every case of dissonance and its reduction must be analyzed on a case-by-case basis. He states,

There are, certainly, individual differences among people in the degree to which... they react to... dissonance. For some people dissonance is an extremely painful

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<sup>5</sup> For example, there may be dissonance in an individual’s original state of expectations between what they believe they are entitled to and what they are actually receiving. Those individuals may feel entitled to a job but are experiencing unemployment; may believe in equal wages but are being paid less than an equal peer; may wish to practice a certain religion but are facing religious discrimination.

and intolerable thing, while there are others who seem to be able to tolerate a larger amount of dissonance (Festinger 1957, 266-267).

However, the question then arises whether perpetrators of violent acts are less tolerant to dissonance than the majority, or are their levels of dissonance greater, or is it a combination of both. To answer this question, an analysis is necessary of to what extent the belief system that is justifying the impulse is elaborated and established.

Nevertheless, either of these dynamics can hold. On one hand, as has been discussed, a perpetrator may be less tolerant to dissonance and this may lead him or her to act out violently, thus rejecting the accepted social norms that inhibit such act. On the other hand, perpetrators may not experience dissonance at all. However, further psychoanalysis of primary accounts would be needed to make a distinction; it also likely varies on a case-to-case basis.

### Social Identity Theory

Tajfel's social identity theory has three components: categorization, identification, and comparison. First, social categorization entails individuals placing others into groups. Second, individuals categorize themselves as a member of one, or multiple, of those groups that they perceive will maintain or improve their self-esteem. Finally, individuals engage in social comparison, by comparing their identified group with other categories.

The criteria to be an ingroup member is that the individual identifies himself with the group, and the group members acknowledge the individual as part of the ingroup. According to Tajfel, a group is a collection of people who perceive themselves in a similar way. Members may share like feelings of "emotional involvement" in the identity

and share similar beliefs in social structure. These are not necessary for a group to form, however they may be relevant to the type of groups in question in this thesis. Further, social categorization is a “cognitive tool that segment [s], classify, and order the social environment”; thus, this is the process by which one identifies with a group. (Tajfel and Turner 1986, 15). De-categorization, then, is the undoing or shifting of self-categorization or identification from one group, possibly to another.

Another important element of Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory is that not only is it vital that individuals self-categorize, they then must place their group in a scheme compared to other groups. Individuals cannot compare their group with every outgroup, so there must be certain ones to which they refer. (Tajfel and Turner 1986, 16) Perhaps, this is similar to the hypothesis of vicarious retribution on an intergroup level rather than interpersonal.

There are, however, a couple caveats to this theory. The researchers frame their theory by exploring why antagonism is targeted against an other. Thus, they look to the ingroup to explore the intergroup conflict but do not delve much into inner group relations. They conclude that intergroup conflict occurs because an ingroup individual negatively perceives an outgroup for a reason based on a comparison being made to that other categorization. Second, Tajfel and Turner focus on a single individual identity and are not complicated by identifying with multiple groups.

In contrast, Lasswell understands that individuals have multiple identities. For example, a woman living in the United States whose parents emigrated from India may be a member of at least three separate identities: American, female, and Indian. This example is greatly simplified as individuals encompass numerous identities including

sports teams, schools attended, video game passions, volunteer activities, and other hobbies or elements that comprise a person. Essentially, these various identities are the building blocks of who individuals are and how they conduct their lives.

However, different identities within a person become more salient given different situations (Turner et al. 1987). For example, when a teenage boy who plays varsity basketball and is the lead actor in the school play is on the court, his identity as a basketball player is greatly heightened over his identity as an actor. The opposite occurs when he is on stage. ISIS fighters may have many different identities as well. They could identify with their gender, Islam, region, and other parts of their upbringing. “Promoter of violent jihad” is only one of their many identities.

The more groups with which individuals identify, the more complex is their whole identity. Since single identities are salient in different scenarios, every identity of an individual may be categorized as salient at a certain point in time. Identity complexity is important because interpersonal conflict may be more easily and effectively lessened if their identities are complex, or able to be further complicated, which will be addressed later.

### Relative Deprivation

Faye Crosby uses the working theories of Davis (1959), Gurr (1970), and Runciman (1996) to create a comprehensive model of relative-deprivation. Relative-deprivation theory “refers to the proposition that one’s sense of grievance is not a monotonic function of one’s actual situation in an absolute sense” (Crosby 1976, 88) because individuals compare their situations to one another, rather than evaluating it without reference subjects.



The concept, however, “is used to refer to the emotion one feels when making negatively discrepant comparisons...the emotion of relative deprivation is one type of *anger* [italics in original]” (Crosby 1976, 88); anger is a raw impulse and, hence, an action of the id. Thus, at the root of the theory is an acting out of the Freudian, id. Nevertheless, it is important to note that relative-deprivation can, but does not always, lead to violence; it can lead to no acts, moderate acts, and extreme acts. Lastly, in defining the theory, it is important to understand that deprivation is not absolute, but relative; one must have a subjective reference point to be comparing oneself to feel relatively deprived (Crosby 1976, 85). Thus, the more exposure one has to “others” and the world, – through education, media, and travel, for example – the greater the likelihood for these feelings to arise, since the exposed individual has more experiences to which to compare.

Rather than casting her model as one possible causal chain of relative-deprivation, Crosby sees it as an evolutionary law in the theory of relative-deprivation. She claims to have created a comprehensive model of relative-deprivation that is built upon the previous work regarding the topic (Crosby 1976, 87). According to this model (1976, 90), in order for action based on relative-deprivation anger to occur, five preconditions must be met:

- “1 see that someone else (Other) [parenthesis in original] posses X,
- 2 want X,
- 3 feel entitled to X,
- 4 think it feasible to obtain X, and
- 5 lack a sense of personal responsibility for not having X”

These are the preconditions for someone to take the step of feeling relatively deprived, to acting upon those feelings. Without the presence of precondition four, an individual is

unlikely to act on this anger; individuals may only act if they feel that change is feasible and a difference can be made through personal actions. She says that a person will stop having feelings of relative-deprivation when X is no longer attainable (when pre-condition 4 is not met), but will continue to want X if it is feasible (Crosby 1976, 91). Thus, if one can diminish the feeling that there is an opportunity for change or make X unfeasible, then violent acts may be better avoided.

Further pertinent to this study is that “X does not necessarily represent a concrete object. It can also refer to an action; simply translate the phrase *possession of X* into *capacity to perform X* [italics in original]” (Crosby 1976, 90). When using the model to analyze violent acts, it is more likely to refer to the capacity to perform.

Once the preconditions have been met, the likelihood of whether the anger will be translated into violence or constructive actions depends on mediating variables: whether one is intropunitive or extropunitive, one’s level of personal control, and one’s real opportunities for effecting change. Individuals who have extropunitive tendencies take their anger of being relative deprived out in violent acts toward society. There are two paths an extropunitive may follow to reach this act. First, if the preconditions are met, then feelings of relative-deprivation are onset. Next, if the extropunitive tends to have low personal control, then an act of violence towards society is likely. The second path follows: if the preconditions are met, feelings of relative-deprivation begin, and if one tends to be extropunitive but has high personal control, constructive opportunities for change must be

blocked in order for an act of violence against society to occur.<sup>6</sup> (Crosby 1976, 100) Thus, blocked constructive opportunities represses the anger (the id), and instead leads to violence as the outlet.

There are a few connections between this model of relative-deprivation and Festinger's one of cognitive dissonance, like the connection between personal control and tolerance. If one has less personal control, one may have a lower tolerance for dissonance. The combination of these characteristics increases the probability of a violent act. Too, according to Crosby (1976, 85), "People are, in fact, concerned with justice and fairness and do feel dissatisfied when their own internal codes are violated", which speaks to Festinger's notions that when one's expectations are met, consonance is present, but when they are not, and violated as Crosby alludes to above, then dissonance occurs. Hence, injustice and inequality, from which feelings of relative-deprivation anger arise, create dissonance.

Gurr's "value expectations" also align with Festinger. Value expectations are "those goods and opportunities that the individual wants and to which he feels entitled, based on comparisons with similar others" (Crosby 1976, 88). Thus, when individuals feel they are experiencing everything to which they are entitled, then the environment is

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<sup>6</sup> 1.) Preconditions are met → Starts to feel relatively deprived → Extropunitive tendencies → Low personal control → Violence against society occurs. 2.) Preconditions are met → Starts to feel relatively deprived → Extropunitive tendencies → High personal control → Opportunities for expression/outlets are blocked → Violence against society occurs.

consonant. These expectations occur from comparing oneself to others. “Person wants what similar others possess” (Crosby 1976, 95), so if similar others all possess the same expectations and are surrounded by those similar to himself or herself, then there is no opportunity for relative-deprivation or dissonance to emerge.

Ian Walker and Thomas F. Pettigrew (1984) provide a critique of Crosby’s (1976) model of egoistical relative deprivation, which “occurs when an individual compares himself to others” (Crosby 1976, 88). Walker and Pettigrew first show the interdependence between relative-deprivation and Tajfel’s social identity theory.

The third component of social identity theory, social comparison, is where Crosby and Tajfel most overlap. Walker and Pettigrew state that “the positive and negative aspects of membership in one particular group are contingent on that group’s standing relative to other reference groups. To determine their social identity, people generally compare their own membership group to some other reference group(s) along important evaluative dimensions [parentheses in original]” (Walker and Pettigrew, 1984, 302). Thus, one group uses another group as a reference point, which relates to Crosby’s work in claiming that deprivation is relative, not absolute. Further Walker and Pettigrew clearly outline the relationship between social identity theory and relative-deprivation theory by stating,

In CIC [Categorization-Identity-Comparison, which is equivalent to social identity theory here] theory individuals evaluate their social identifications and social identities by comparing the membership group with some referent other. If the evaluation proves to be negative, the individual experiences relative deprivation

and is motivated to one of several possible behaviors<sup>7</sup>, ranging from changing membership<sup>8</sup> in the negatively evaluated group to changing the dimensions of comparison (Walker and Pettigrew 1984, 302).

Though Walker and Pettigrew establish the connection between social identity theory and relative-deprivation, they critique Crosby's aged model and advocate for adjustment to better fit social identity theory with relative-deprivation. The relevance and importance of Crosby's model of relative deprivation is acknowledged when they state that "she turns earlier theorists on their heads by viewing relative-deprivation as an intervening variable rather than a hypothetical construct" (Walker and Pettigrew, 1984, 304). However, Walker and Pettigrew surface three major criticisms: first, that she is too focused on egoistical relative deprivation and does not devote enough attention to fraternalistic deprivation. Second, the tree-diagram models used to demonstrate the various paths of relatively deprived feelings are difficult to test. Lastly, her "behavioral dependent variables", the two potential outcomes – "constructive change of society" and "violence against society" – that are triggered by feelings of relative deprivation, are criticized (Walker and Pettigrew, 1984, 304). Walker and Pettigrew argue that "violence against society" is often a planned and reasoned action. Likewise, "constructive change of society" can be just as destructive and violent – sometimes more so – toward society, like during a "rally or a riot" (Walker and Pettigrew, 1984, 304). Further, they claim that there is no

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<sup>7</sup> Previously outlined in footnote 6.

<sup>8</sup> Like leaving a society to a community appealing to one's feelings of dissonance.

differentiation between violence motivated by a drive for social change and a drive to obtain social control.

Additional to critiquing Crosby's specific model, Walker and Pettigrew provide conceptual deficiencies to the theory of relative deprivation. First, they argue that too much focus has been on egoistical deprivation, like by Gurr and Crosby, and not enough theorizing has been attributed to fraternalistic deprivation. Runciman is the only one that differentiates between egoistic deprivation and fraternal deprivation, which is when one "compares his own reference group to other reference groups" (Crosby 1976, 88). Crosby's comprehensive model is applicable to both types; however, Runciman's fraternal deprivation may be more relevant to the discussion of intergroup conflict, especially in cases of vicarious retribution. Walker and Pettigrew argue that fraternal deprivation most supports social identity theory because,

when Tajfel (1982) maintains that positive social identity, reinterpretation of group attributes and social action are meaningful only in comparison with *other groups*, the empirical tests of these claims must necessarily involve fraternal – not egoistic – comparisons [parentheses and italics in original] (Walker and Pettigrew, 1984, 305).

Thus, while the work on egoistical deprivation is fundamentally necessary, relative deprivation theorization ought to shift towards fraternalistic deprivation.

Walker and Pettigrew also argue that only cognitive components have been taken into account; however, affective components deserve equal attention. They believe that "important insights could be gained by emphasizing a distinction between cognitive and affective components within the unitary concept of RD [relative-deprivation]" (Walker and

Pettigrew, 1984, 307). Further, to relate to Lickel et al., the element of id impulses, which is affective, ought to be taken into account more seriously.

Additionally, there is a problem in “*predicting* the referent people will use for comparison [italics in original]” (Walker and Pettigrew 1984, 308). Some work on the “referent selection process” has formed, but there ought to be further development in theorizing *how* an individual or ingroup chooses to whom they refer themselves (Walker and Pettigrew 1984, 308-309). Thus, once it is determined why one group is selected as the referent, the elements that are being compared of that referent group must also be examined.

### Defense Mechanism Theory

Though the theory of defense mechanisms has been highly contested in the past, there is now significant evidence to show the existence of such mechanisms. Some psychologists have argued that there was no way to demonstrate what happens in one’s unconscious, simply because it is unconscious. However, Phebe Cramer disputes this argument by providing the “Seven Pillars of Defense Mechanism Theory,” which argues that humans employ a variety of defense mechanisms in their unconscious.

Defense mechanisms “protect the individual from experiencing excessive anxiety, and to protect the self and self-esteem” (Cramer 2009, 1). To pose the existence of defense mechanisms, Cramer focuses on three: denial, projection, and identification. The first pillar directly addresses the dispute as to whether defense mechanisms exist by stating that they operate outside the conscious awareness of an individual, and yet they have behavioral

consequences. They are unconscious processes functioning outside conscious awareness used to protect one's self.

Defense mechanisms are of varying complexity. From least to most complex is denial, projection, and identification. Regarding projection, the most relevant mechanism to understanding the extreme behavior addressed by this thesis, Cramer claims that "it functions by removing disturbing thoughts or feelings from the person and placing, or attributing them to someone else" (Cramer 2009, 3). For this to occur, one must abide by a set of codes in order to have the disturbing thought or feelings that disrupts this code.

Although some theorists define projection more broadly to encompass straightforward cognitive bias (Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer, 1995), it becomes defensive when an individual perceives others to embody the threatening trait to refrain from acknowledging that trait in oneself.

ISIS fighters may be a prime example of the operation of the projection defense. The negative trait that ISIS fighters are at least partially repressing may be their impiety. Thus, this impiety is what is being projected onto others to avoid acknowledging it in themselves.

A study done by Newman, Duff, and Baumeister (1997) helps support this theory. In their experiment, the researchers gave false positive and negative feedback about personal traits to a pool of subjects. They were then asked to attempt to suppress the negative feedback. Then, the subjects were shown a stimulus person who obtained some of these attributed positive and negative traits. Next, they were asked to rate the stimulus person based on the dimensions on which the subjects received feedback. They reported a heightened response of the negative traits portrayed in the stimulus in which the subject



was initially asked to suppress. Thus, the researcher concluded that “projection results from trying to suppress thoughts about some bad trait in oneself”.

Because ISIS fighters may be suppressing the negative trait of impiety, then, in line with Newman’s findings, perhaps the fighters are more likely to ascribe impiety to others, such as unveiled women and homosexuals. Rather than identifying with the impious to diminish their guilt as would be the false consensus effect, they are portraying the more rigid definition of projection. Projection is, thus, used as a defense mechanism rather than a conscious bias, insofar as it prevents the fighters from recognizing their own impiety.

Cramer also claims that within the individual there is a chronology of defense mechanism development; as individuals mature, so does the complexity of their defense mechanisms. Denial appears to be most prevalent in children up to the age of five, but once a child reaches the ages eight to eleven, projection begins to take over. Cramer cites research to show that at the age of five, there is little “understanding” of denial as a defense mechanism; however, at the age of eight, there appears to be more of an understanding. Once the defense mechanism becomes understood and operating inside awareness, it is less effective and not primarily utilized (Cramer 2009, 3). Once one reaches adolescence, identification is most prevalent. According to Cramer, identification “involves a change in the self, so as to become more like some admired person or group” (2009, 3). Instead of altering “reality”, the mechanism is internal; it is a change in personal beliefs or attributes ascribed to oneself, rather than changing the reality of others through perception or stereotypes.

Average ISIS fighters are in their mid-twenties. By that time, it would be expected for identification to be the most effective defense mechanism, however it appears that

projection may still be the most common defense mechanism among this group. Perhaps this is due to a pausing in maturation, reinforced by the fighters' subculture. In other words, they are "stuck" at the defense mechanism maturity level below what would be expected at their age, because the society in which they are engaged in promotes the use of projection rather than identification. Projection is the reinforced mechanism as it fuels the movement's ideology, thus blocking more mature defense mechanisms.

Though this model appears well-fitting to the case of ISIS, it is also important to acknowledge the existence of other factors. Cramer conducts her research among average, middle-class individuals. These individuals are not surrounded by the same extreme environment of ISIS fighters. Thus, factors like the entrenched subculture, physical punitive punishment, and intense religious ideals may also play a large role in the conduction of defense mechanisms in ISIS that Cramer does not incorporate.

With the above critique in mind, Cramer supports the possible explanation for such heinous actions by stating that "immature defenses are related to maladaptive functioning" (Cramer 2009, 6). Since the employed defense mechanism of ISIS fighters appear to be immature, then according to Cramer, it is not surprising that they are operating abnormally in the wider global society. The actions of ISIS fighters are heinous human rights violations and morally wrong. Further, their subculture may continue to perpetuate the stagnation of current and new fighters' defense mechanism development.

Cramer also finds that defense mechanisms are more frequently used in stressful environments, which is consistent with their defining function to decrease feelings of anxiety and threats to esteem. Functioning within ISIS society is inarguably a stressful environment, with constant pressure to adhere to strict codes of living. Cramer states that

“increased stress leads to increased defense use, which in turn lessens the conscious experience of anxiety or psychological upset” (2009, 9). Thus, the combination of increased defense use due to the stressful environment with the use of immature mechanisms, it is not surprising that there may be some psychological disorder within ISIS fighters.

Cramer claims that paranoia has shown to be associated with an extensive and age-inappropriate use of projection. Perhaps, the fighters are paranoid of the evolving western, globalized, “dangerous, and infidel infested”, world. Thus, due to the incongruence between their age and defense mechanism maturity, are maladaptive to this evolving society. They may also be exhibiting a pathological disorder not yet diagnosable or a combination of disorders. Additionally, “individuals with different diagnoses may use several different defenses – i.e., no single defense is uniquely linked with a specific diagnosis” (Cramer 2009, 11). Hence, ISIS fighters may be exhibiting a combination of defense mechanisms and other disorders, however, a diagnosis entails more extensive resources and research.

Sometimes bizarre psychological mechanisms are convenient given an environment, which would help contextualize the overuse of projection in ISIS society, as well. The thoughts of an individual fighter may begin by not wanting to think impiously, progress to suppressing such thoughts of impiety, and so engages in actions to prove piety, also labelled as a reaction formation that will be further discussed. As a result, these actions may be disturbing behavioral consequences of immature and abnormal psychological mechanisms reinforced by a myriad of factors.

### Reaction Formation

There are several types of defense mechanisms: reaction formation, projection, displacement, undoing, isolation, sublimation, and denial. However, reaction formation is one of the most supported mechanisms to have been tested and proven to occur. According to Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer, “the concept of reaction formation involves converting a socially unacceptable impulse into its opposite” (1998, 1085), which may be “exaggerated or extreme” (1998, 1089). Reaction formation is a type of defense mechanism that occurs when an individual feels his or her self-esteem is threatened. In fact, “Most researchers in personality and social psychology today would readily acknowledge that people defend their self-concepts against esteem threats” (Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer 1998, 1083).

One component of being an ingroup member is that an individual wishes to protect their self-esteem and maintain or create a positive social identity (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, and Schmid, 2011). There are two ways to do this. One is to feel positive about one’s own group by attributing negative characteristics. Fighters stereotype outsiders as wrongdoers who are living a sinful life. This allows the fighters, and anyone identified as an ingroup member, to feel superior and just in their actions.

Second, a group may engage in acts that make them feel good about themselves in terms of what they can do for society to heighten both their self-esteem and the esteem outsiders hold towards the ingroup. This can appear in many different forms. For example, the Navajo code talkers of World War II were probably proud of their contribution to the war effort. This is so because their code based on the native Navajo language was pivotal in defeating the Axis powers. Hence, this positive contribution to

society made ingroup Navajo members feel good about their group. Likewise, the esteem held towards Navajos by Americans and Ally powers was also heightened, since they were critical to winning the war. Similar examples include the Japanese Nisei fighters of World War II, and martyrdom in general.

This may not be applicable to ISIS, since they do not appear to be concerned with being well liked by outgroups. However, it may be relevant in regard to Arab culture. Sometimes, ingroups compare themselves based on relevant traits like intelligence and status, but some, especially lower-status ingroup members, may compare themselves on traits, like warmth and hospitality (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, and Schmid, 2011). Arab culture tends to pride itself on being hospitable to travelers, strangers, and anyone in need. This hospitality may feed into a positive self-esteem with the identification as an Arab. Hence, radical Arab ISIS fighters may feel as though they are providing haven for recruits, or those deemed lost, which would give them assurance in adhering to the positive trait of Arab hospitality. Thus, Arabs may feel group superiority by being good to other groups.

As Cramer made clear, by definition, defense mechanisms are not consciously employed; they are a way for individuals to protect themselves against an inner threat to their self-esteem. Thus, defense mechanisms may be employed when repression is not effective, which implies that repression is not a defense mechanism. Rather, Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer claim that defense mechanisms occur as a result of insufficient repression. However, it is impossible to know or test to what extent an individual represses since it is by definition not able to be reported. Hence, it may not be that repression is not in effect, but some combination of repression and defense mechanisms is occurring.

Reaction formation is a defense mechanism against dangerous urges that may threaten one's self-esteem; instead of satisfying the impulse, one might engage in the exact opposite, or develop a rigid belief in opposition to protect oneself. This exists in societies where individuals may feel guilty for acting upon their urges. For example, individuals who have impious urges, but are expected in their community to be pious, may become extremely pious to protect against the impious desires. However, this mechanism is also fragile, since the unconscious is attempting to suppress and compensate for desires believed to be unacceptable. Hence, this supports the argument that repression may not be completely absent, but rather insufficient in easing the mind of the individual.

### Moral Indignation

To discuss moral indignation, P.F. Strawson first addresses the foundations and elements of resentment. Circumstances that may produce resentment are "situations in which one person is offended or injured by the action of another and in which – in the absence of special considerations – offended person might naturally or normally be expected to feel resentment" (Strawson 1974, 7). For example, if one's foot is stepped upon while walking down the street, the victim's level of resentment will depend on whether special conditions (later outlined) appear to have been a factor. If no special conditions are present, then the victim may believe the perpetrator purposefully crushed his or her foot out of malice and the victim will resent the perpetrator.

The presence of certain special conditions may diminish the level of resentment held. Strawson claims that reactive attitudes are adjusted when an individual sees that there is incongruity between offenders' morals, or perceived morals, and their actions. In this

case, feelings of resentment may be diminished (Strawson 1974, 8). These special conditions are outlined to include,

...conditions like compulsion by another, or innate incapacity, or insanity, or other less extreme forms of psychological disorder, or the existence of circumstances in which the making of any other choice would be morally inadmissible or would be too much to expect of any man (Strawson 1974, 2-3).

Thus, for any perpetrator who is seen as “abnormal” or not acting in one’s “right mind”, the amount of resentment is reduced or nulled.

This also applies to moral indignation. If offenders are categorized as “abnormal”, then they are not held to the same moral codes of a society; the individual is not a “morally responsible agent”, and, thus, is not a “member of the moral community” (Strawson 1974, 17). Thus, one cannot apply normal standards of obligation and responsibility when special conditions are present; “freedom” and “normalcy” is when these conditions are not present.

An individual’s reaction to an offender is not only based on the offender’s characteristics, but also the victim's reactive attitudes. According to Strawson, “participant reactive attitudes are essentially normal human reactions to the good or ill will of indifferent others towards us” (Strawson 1974, 10). The expectations of goodwill is determined by the social structure by which individuals adhere (Strawson 1974, 14).

Resentment is a personal reactive attitude; moral indignation is a moral reactive attitude. Both are merely reactions to felt damaging behavior, however, Strawson identifies the difference in this way:

The reactive attitudes I have now to discuss [those of moral indignation] might be described as the sympathetic or vicarious or impersonal or disinterested or

generalized analogues of the reactive attitudes I have already discussed. They are reactions to the qualities of others' wills, not towards ourselves, but towards others. Because of this impersonal or vicarious character, we give them different names. Thus, one who experiences the vicarious analogue of resentment is said to be indignant or disapproving, or morally indignant or disapproving" (Strawson 1974, 14).

Thus, moral indignation appears to just be a personal step removed from resentment.

There may be a connection to the theory of vicarious retribution, since Strawson speaks to the point that resentment is a personal reaction while moral indignation is an extension, possibly less personal reaction. To this, he states, "we can have direct dealings with human beings without any degree of personal involvement, treating them simply as creatures to be handled in our own interests, or our side's, or society's – or even theirs" (Strawson 1974, 12). Like vicarious retribution, an individual may feel morally indignant towards an entire group of people or society for the actions of single perpetrator.

To apply the frameworks of resentment and moral indignation to terrorism, one must deem the perpetrator as having 'normal' interpersonal-relations and being "free" from special conditions. If one saw a terrorist as suffering from any special conditions, then there would be a rationalization for the violent acts. Some may very well say that perpetrators, such as the head choppers of ISIS, are mentally ill or not "normal" in one way or another; however, this is merely another factor to consider. Some may consider terrorists to suffer from special conditions, but there may be different explanations through various psychological frameworks.



Further, hypothetical examples that demonstrate a connection between reaction formations and moral indignation, hypothetical examples follows:

If an individual is born into an extremely pious Sunni Muslim society, then he or she would probably be raised strictly within Islamic codes. This would entail earnestly believing in the words of the Qur'an and hadith. Deviation from anything other than complete devotion may result in dishonor and extreme physical punishment or exile. Regarding the discussion of reaction formation and ISIS, if an individual is raised in such an orthodox society and unconsciously doubts the pillars of Islam, then he or she may become overly devout, to the point of extremity. This is to compensate for thoughts doubting the scriptures, rituals, and beliefs of Islam; thereby eliminating the guilt. This may be a source of extreme reactions to perceived impiety enacted by ISIS. He or she may fully embrace the rhetoric of a pan-Sunni caliphate to compensate for unconscious doubts in the religion and the movement's objectives.

ISIS fighters may well be exhibiting reaction formations in their behavior towards perceived to be impious or immoral others. This view leads to punitive action taken against those impiously perceived, which may be fueled by moral indignation and the fragility in which reaction formation occurs. The connection to moral indignation is crucial; if one is being openly devout then he or she may feel indignant to those who are not, or perceived to be not. The esteem of the pious person (acting pious as a result of reaction formation) may feel threatened or injured by the impious group due to their impiety, thus resulting in feelings of moral indignation. Supporting the reason behind such extremity, Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer write, "In particular, when people are publicly or implicitly accused of having socially undesirable sexual feelings, prejudiced attitudes, or failures of competence,

some respond by asserting the opposite (and attempting to prove it) to an *exceptionally high degree* [parentheses in original, italics inserted]” (1998, 1089). The extremity of such ISIS fighters may be a result of the developed moral indignation fueled by a reaction formation; as well as the fragility of the reaction formation, since it could be compensating for what is not sufficiently repressed.

A devout, Sunni Muslim man may develop an intense reaction formation to the sight of an unveiled woman. In this instance, two separate reaction formations may develop: one as a result of her sexual enticement and another due to her perceived impiety. Thus, extreme punitive action may occur. Like in the example described above, fighters unconsciously doubting their piety may, in turn, act extremely pious; the sight of an unveiled woman, which displays such impiety, may be perceived as a threat to their own piety. Hence, punitive action may occur towards the unveiled women to satisfy the unconscious, impious guilt and conscious threat to piety as well as feelings of moral indignation of the fighter.

In the other possible reaction formation developing in this scenario, an ISIS fighter may be defending against his heightened sexual urge aroused by the woman. His reaction may be to reject these “inappropriate” sexual desires as well as denounce impious sexual interactions, since such actions are sinful and outlawed in strict Sunni communities. This, too, may result in aggressiveness towards the woman, since she is now blameworthy in his conscious for being enticing.

In accordance with this theory, the contemporary extremely harsh treatment of women in some Muslim societies or movements, such as ISIS, may not truly be a result of animus toward women. Instead it may be the result of a defense mechanism for men to hide

their subconscious urges to act impiously, to engage in inappropriate sexual actions, or a conscious feeling of moral indignation against those perceived to be impious, most likely of which is a combination. Though not consciously aware of the reason for his actions, he must show animus towards the women perceived as harlots because they would engage his unacceptable desires.

Another example of reaction formation as a result of perceived to be inappropriate sexual desires is homophobia. A study done by Adams, Wright, and Lohr in 1996 proved the existence of reaction formation in relation to homophobia. The experimenters placed homophobic males in front of videos showing homosexual intercourse. Though the subject reported no sexual arousal, the physiological results showed the opposite. This shows that the male denouncing homosexuality may actually be more prone to homosexual arousal. The unconscious sexual arousal results in a conscious rejection of homosexuality. (Adams, Wright, and Lohr, 1996).

Homosexuality of any sort is deemed shameful and immoral in Muslim communities, and even more so in extreme organizations like ISIS. In its terror and extreme interpretations of the Qur'an, ISIS has been known to persecute and execute many gay men. As punishment, the accused homosexual male is pushed off a tall building. If the fall is not enough to kill him, a group on the ground is present to ensure his death by stoning. Reportedly, ISIS killed 36 gay men in the month of December 2015 alone and continues its persecution today of young homosexual males aged as young as fifteen. (counterextremism.com, 2018).

Extrapolating from the study of Adams, Wright, and Lohr, perhaps some male fighters are unconsciously having homosexual tendencies that are resulting in extreme

animosity towards homosexuals. This circumstance is similar to those experiencing unacceptable urges towards unapproachable women; aggression and blame is thus being projected onto women and homosexuals as a result of unconscious guilt of inappropriate sexual, homosexual, or overall impious urges – fueled by perceived impiety which creates moral indignation.

### Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

Kohlberg developed a six-stage theory of moral development. It claims that as humans develop, so does their morality. However applicable Kohlberg's work may be, it is also important to bear in mind that his scale only leads up to his conception of morality. Nevertheless, his stages are applicable to help explain a justification for the adherence ISIS fighters have to their society, as do others to their respective societies.

The stages are as follows:

Stage 1: The punishment and obedience orientation.

Stage 2: The instrumental relativist orientation.

Stage 3: The interpersonal concordance or "good boy-nice girl" orientation.

Stage 4: The "law and order" orientation.

Stage 5: The social-contract legalistic orientation (usually with utilitarian overtones).

Stage 6: The universal ethical-principle orientation. (Kohlberg, 1971)

According to Kohlberg, most humans reach Stage 4 of his moral scale, with only some reaching Stages 5 and 6. ISIS fighters, too, develop to Stage 4, which may seem incongruous at first, but helps to explain why the group has grown so strong and

continues to expand. It may appear as though these fighters are unable to develop past the second stage, which is self-interest, given that the maturation of defense mechanisms may halt around that time. However, outside observers may have this perception because they do not want to consider the possibility that beheading or raping another human being is at the same level of maturity as their own.

Prior to joining the organization, ISIS fighters may have found recruitment most attractive at Stage 3 of their moral development. This occurs in school-age years when the individual is seeking approval and affection. For example, if a school-age or teenage boy sees his older brother engaging in ISIS activity, then he may seek approval by conforming to his older brother's behavior. Being obedient and engaging in the same society satisfies the teenager's desire for approval and positive relations. Once this is fulfilled, his conformity within the organization is rigidified by the ISIS social order, and reaches Stage 4 of Kohlberg's model. This stage is characterized by authority and social order, with a fixation on maintaining the adopted social order. He now feels integrated, accepted, and productive within ISIS society. Further, his behaviors continue to be reinforced through the structured belief system.

What appears incongruent to outside observers is that they, too, see themselves as above Stage 3, but find it hard to grasp that their own level of morality matches those of ISIS fighters. The difference, however, is these outside observers abide by a completely different social order. Both social orders offer similar satisfactions to an individual seeking acceptance within a society. The "law and order" of ISIS is the caliphate, while many other societies accept democracy and different ideals of morality as the order by which to abide.

The rigidity and strictly adhered social structure is one element that makes ISIS so successful. They are attractive for the same reasons that other social orders are attractive; they provide an opportunity to feel as though one plays a vital role in a society and an identity to some that feel lost. Having a larger goal to strive towards also strengthens the society. Thus, it is not possible to dismiss ISIS as an anomaly, for it functions in similar ways as many other successful social orders. Their beliefs in what laws should be and how society ought to operate is the differentiating factor.

### Conclusion of Theories

Given the review of the psychological theories and some potential applications to the psyche of extremists, it is important to explore the relationships among these theories and connect them back to the divisions of personality. If connections can be made through these theories of how and why one may inflict violence, then potential explanations may be considered to decipher the psychological complexity of an extremist. Most of the theories may be traced back and incorporated with Lasswell's theory regarding the id, ego, and superego. By taking these subconscious entities into account with other theories on violence, there may be more nuanced psychological explanations of extremist action.

How do individuals progress to a point where they can indulge their id while satisfying their superego? To do this, the id must be suppressed or indulged, or indulged while being consciously suppressed. The individuals chopping off heads must be consistent with their conscience in order to avoid feelings of guilt. Further, there are too many instances of like heinous actions for psychopathology to be the reason. Cramer says

the use of projection as a defense mechanism may be this stronghold, while Strawson suggests moral indignation accounts for these actions.

Strawson provides that one becomes indignant when a norm is violated according to the individual's social and moral order. The breaking of this social rule justifies one to lash out, which indulges the id. He or she is often further encouraged by those in society since they, too, feel indignant towards the rule that has been broken. Both the id and superego are being satisfied in this instance. The superego is supported through the rigidity of society that supports retaliation for the violated norm, and the id is allowed to act upon the urge because it does not violate the superego. The impiety of an other is a violation to an ISIS fighter's personal morality, and this indignation allows the conscious to act abrasively.

In contrast, Cramer suggests that these individuals do not feel guilty for perpetrating such atrocities because of the overuse and reinforcement of projection as the primary defense mechanism. Through projection, the id is suppressed enough to satisfy the superego. However, since defense mechanisms are unconscious, the satisfaction of the id is unconscious. Thus, the id is indulged while simultaneously being suppressed from consciousness.

It appears that there may be a connection between Freudian's theory, Lasswell's displacement hypothesis, Strawson's moral indignation, and Cramer's defense mechanisms insofar as these theories hold. Since displacement and defense mechanisms take place outside of conscious awareness, the discomfort that is displaced onto a remote object may be a result of a defense mechanism, such as projection. The defense mechanism is suppressing the discomfort and then it is displaced. Thus, defense

mechanisms may account for what is occurring unconsciously to allow for displacement to then occur; displacement, then, may be the unconscious result of defense mechanisms.

Displacement of the particular attribution onto a group then leads to stereotyping and Strawson's moral indignation. The individual has become morally indignant towards the offenders, and since the indignation is not taken out on the direct object, stereotypes develop. For example, consider that a Muslim teenage boy sees his mother engaging in impious activity. The impiety of his mother causes discomfort, but it is repressed through defense mechanisms. However, the discomfort actualizes in displacing it onto all other Muslim women. Thus, he has become morally indignant towards the group that identifies as Muslim women and has stereotyped anyone fitting that identity as impious. Hence, the result is that the boy satisfies the defensively repressed id urges by acting out towards a group he has stereotyped as impious.

In another possible scenario that may pertain to ISIS fighters, the actions of displacement could be a result of repressing an individual's negative self-assessment about an attribute. Here, the defense mechanisms work to repress the acceptance of the individual's negative trait and then it is displaced onto another object. Similar to the previous example, if an individual is having impious thoughts, feelings, or urges, then defense mechanisms may unconsciously suppress them. Then, displacement occurs in ascribing the attribute of impiety to others, when it is the individual refusing to recognize it in him or herself. Hence, this leads to the same pattern of moral indignation and stereotyping.



## **Analysis and Recommendations**

Insofar as Lasswell's psychological model relies on the existence of the id, ego, and superego, Tajfel's social identity theory, Strawson's explanation of moral indignation against impiety, and Cramer's ideas about defense-mechanism maturity and their allowance for unconscious indulgence hold, what can be done to derail the rigid social order of ISIS or prevent its expansion?

In accounts of individuals who once engaged in the actions of ISIS, there appears to be a moment of realization. Manwar Ali was a dedicated member of ISIS who recruited young men, fundraised in the name of violent jihad, and preached his commitment to establishing an Islamic Caliphate for over fifteen years. He claims that joining the group at such a young age prevented him from developing a virtuous character, which may relate to the maturity of defense mechanisms and becoming "stuck" in this rigidified culture. After more than a decade of promoting ISIS, while his family lived safely in the United Kingdom, Ali began to question his actions and the justification of a violent jihad. It is important to note that this may have been a true change in heart by Ali and not influenced by pressures of detainment. Threats within detainment can sometimes coerce individuals into professing a change in heart. Rather, he said that he became aware of the unjust violence and misinterpretation of Islam through self-contemplation and asking himself the hard questions about what the Qur'an says. He recognizes that those drawn to ISIS are not much different from everyone else but become "blinded by the cause". In order to de-radicalize these young men, Ali says they must be filled with human healing values that increase understanding and awareness of others.

Though the majority of ISIS may not have the time or maturity to come to this self-realization, many fighters who were captured while carrying out an attack, or succeeded in doing so and then were arrested, attest to feelings of remorse. There are videos of young, attempted suicide bombers apologizing, and one that shows an ex-Hamas radical who now preaches peace (AussieDaveinIsrael, YouTube). The psychological theories may account for these examples that show their id satisfaction by the fulfillment of their superego fueled by ISIS doctrine, but once removed from ISIS, their superego “rebalanced” and they felt remorse for acting upon, or attempting to act upon, their urges.

There ought to be a methods to persuade disassociation from radical groups. Rather than military force, since this may enhance their feelings of moral indignation and heighten defense mechanisms, one ought to focus on attacking them psychologically and utilizing other methods of intervention. Ex-radicals spreading their new orientation toward Islam and meaning of jihad that does not advocate such violence may be one of the most promising keys to derailing these radical groups, since they are closest to being an ingroup member.

Current theories support the importance ex-radicals may play in intergroup conflict alleviation. Miles Hewstone addresses some of these theories that stem from Tajfel’s social identity theory. Since ex-radicals are the closest to being an ingroup member, they understand the identity of a “promoter of violent jihad”. Thus, these ex-radicals can relate to this identity, and also to other identities of current fighters like devout Muslim, Arab, male, and potentially similar feelings of moral indignation. Hence,

the ex-radicals ought to appeal to the alternative identities of an ISIS fighter to persuade their withdrawal, which will be further supported by Hewstone.

### Contact Hypothesis

Hewstone (1996) reviews different methods of intervention to weaken conflict between opposing groups. Each of the intervention proposals are based on the assumption that Tajfel's social identity theory holds. Social psychologists have long theorized about the contact hypothesis. Hewstone defines it as "contact between members of different groups will improve relations between them" (Hewstone 1996, 327). Contact, however, can be further broken down to interpersonal and intergroup contact. First, interpersonal contact focuses on taking individuals from opposing groups and placing them in an environment conducive to constructive contact.

There are multiple factors to create such an environment such as "under equal conditions of equal status, stereotype disconfirmation, and cooperation" (Cook 1962, 66-84). Without these elements, contact may exacerbate the negative perceptions instead of weakening them. In this type of intervention, it may be vital to focus on information that pertains to the individuals rather than the group. Thus, the approach may be to focus on shared identity rather than the one that is contradicting and salient. This is the process of "personalization" and crosscutting categories. In a given scenario, one identity is heightened over the other and contact is aimed at balancing or switching the heightened identity to a shared one; it attempts to weaken the salient identity causing conflict and strengthen one that supports cooperation. In theory and in laboratory experiments, this

has lessened discrimination and prejudice (see Bettencourt, Brewer, Rogers-Croak, and Miller, 1992; Miller, Brewer, and Edwards, 1985).

A tactic could be that when first introducing two seventeen-year-old boys, one a devout Muslim who despises the West and one who perceives all Muslims to be terrorists, initiate conversation about a shared identity, like a love of watching soccer, rather than their stereotypical identities. A strategy may be to reveal the superior identities (Muslim and Westerner) to the individuals after they have cooperated and established a similarity. This reinforces a common identity and cooperation.

However, there are drawbacks to using personalization and crosscutting as intervention methods. First, contact must be in a specific environment and the ability to control so many factors is difficult. If the factors are not conducive to constructive contact, then there is a possibility of the contact strengthening the biases, which would be the opposite of the objective. Second, interpersonal contact is on a microlevel. It may create a diffusion of tension between two individuals, but it does not necessarily help weaken animosity between entire groups.

The other branch of the contact hypothesis is intergroup contact. This proposes that the individuals in contact must be seen as representatives of the outgroup, rather than hiding the salient identity during interpersonal contact. This may account for the interpersonal drawback that it only effects the two individuals since these two represent each outgroup. According to Hewstone, it does not have to be numerous members in contact, just ones that are perceived to be representative of each group and, thus, are influential to the rest of the ingroup. This is an instance when the power of ex-radicals

being as close to an ingroup member as possible could be beneficial because they may serve as this ingroup representative.

One of the most promising identities may be that of a devout Muslim. Many Muslims around the world, including the ex-radicals, claim that the violent jihad is not supported in the words for the Qur'an and thus, those engaging in such acts are not true Muslims. If one can appeal to a fighters devotion by saying they are not devout, then it may cause reconsideration and self-recategorization. Rather, possibly strengthening their non-violent identities like Arab, African, male, father, brother, educated, or other identities may prove beneficial.

However, one would have to be cautious when creating this type of environment as well. In a study reviewed by Hewstone that aimed at changing perceptions between Hindus and Muslims, the intergroup contact only heightened anxiety, which negated positive attitude change. To avoid such anxiety, the contact environment ought to be a neutral position that makes each party comfortable and is not threatening.

There appears to be a need for incorporating contact hypothesis with a crosscutting of categorizations. Hewstone supports by stating,

Yet, if crossed categorization can *force* [italics in original] continual realignments among individuals and categories via extended interactions on the basis of multiple categorizations at different points in time (Miller & Brewer, 1986), then it should be a significant component of many interventions to reduce intergroup discrimination (Hewstone 1996, 348).

Hence, if an environment can be created where representatives of two outgroups feel equal and not anxious, then there is room for positive change in attitudes.

Thus, Hewstone finds that interpersonal contact achieved decategorization and intergroup contact achieves change in attitudes. Interpersonal contact, then, may be beneficial when working to de-radicalize a former individual ISIS member. Further, intergroup contact seems to be necessary if one aims to change the perceptions between the entire group of ISIS and the perceived outgroup. This could be done by constructive contact between non-ISIS Muslim leaders, like ex-radicals, and representatives of the outgroup.

Further, Hewstone (1996) addresses a method of intervention when discussing common ingroup identity. He suggests that decategorization, that may occur during the process of contact intervention, may move ingroup members towards the outgroup. This may cause the ingroup member to be seen less positively by the ingroup, which an individual does not prefer assuming that the individual wants to remain being seen positively. In contrast, recategorization increases the attractiveness of the outgroup while maintaining ingroup status. Thus, the tactic could be to attempt to recategorize the group as non-violent to the ingroup members. However, Hewstone (1996) also addresses that this method of intervention seems effective in theory, but remains difficult to implement because religious and ethnic identities tend to be so salient.

Another element of the contact hypothesis regards identity complexity. When individuals encompass multiple salient categories, and thus have a more complex identity, it has been shown in some contexts (Brewer, 2005) that they are less likely to engage in intergroup discrimination or stereotyping. Hence, the hypothesis is that the more complex an identity, the more tolerance it has towards outgroups (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, and Schmid, 2011). One tactic may be to “complicate” the identities of ISIS

fighters by exposing them to outgroups through contact. Insofar as Brewer's findings hold, then the more complex an intervention method can make an individual's identity, then the more tolerant he or she will become toward outgroups. This, in turn, may lessen intergroup conflict and perceptions of stereotypes.

### Prevention Method

It would be ideal to prevent individuals from joining ISIS, Boko Haram, or similar movements in the first place. One of the first steps to do this may be to identify high-risk areas of recruitment. The characteristics of these regions, like Nigeria, may show to have a combination of political, social, and economic unrest with a relatively young population. The turbulence created by such instability fosters psychological problems for a developing population searching for identity and purpose. In these places, not only are their basic human needs not being met, but also their psychological needs to conform or identify are not satisfied. If regions with a high likelihood of fostering radicalism and recruitment can be pre-emptively identified, then aid programs, or methods of preemptive crosscutting, may be implemented to satisfy psychological needs, which could decrease their chances of being attracted to radical groups such as Boko Haram or ISIS.

Tanzania serves as an important example as to how the fostering of stereotypes can be minimized and the societal stability that a lack of stereotyping promotes. President Nyerere, who led the nation twenty-four years before retiring in 1985, saw national unity as the most pressing issue facing the nation. To combat ethnic cleavages, Nyerere implemented multiple policies to increase cooperation and exposure among ethnic

groups. Swahili was made the official language and the teaching of ethnic tongues was prohibited in schools. He also disallowed civil servants from working in their hometowns, which forced many to integrate into unfamiliar villages and with different people (“Tanzania avoid tribal tensions rife elsewhere in Africa”, The Washington Post). This created a national identity alongside ethnic ones, and allowed for understanding between ethnic identities under the shared national identity.

This advanced integration of tribes and ethnicities has proven successful and may be implemented elsewhere, though exposure may need to occur at a young age before each group’s identity, defense mechanism maturation, and moral development have been rigidified. Integrating children in schools may prevent stereotypes from initially developing and then continued integration in the workforce possibly maintains the stability and psychological development. Early exposure could be key because these are the most formative years of an individual’s psychological development. Hence, it may be critical to reach a population when they are in Stage 3 of Kohlberg’s moral development and developing out of the use of projection as a primary defense mechanism. Defense mechanisms, then for example, would be able to mature properly. Rather than halting at projection, they might be able to mature to identification with the understanding of one another. Thus, individuals may be able to recognize their own identities and accept the identities of others.

Likewise, individuals may still progress to Stage 4 of Kohlberg’s model, but the social structure to which they adhere would not be one that makes another inferior, but rather one that sees the importance of plurality within a single social order. This tactic could possibly lessen the likelihood of rigid feelings of moral indignation or reaction



formations developing, since one group is not feeling offended by another. Individuals also may not feel relatively deprived based on their ethnic, tribal, or religious identity because the mixing of status lessens stereotypes.

Further, entitativity breaks down when an individual sees that everyone within a perceived stereotype does not completely represent the assumed traits. Deprivation may stem from other sources, like economic status, but it could be unlikely for an entire group to blame another for their deprivation since one is not better off than another, or even perceived to be. This is an example of “pre-emptive” crosscutting that Hewstone supports by claiming that social scientists and politicians ought to include such conflict prevention strategies in constitutions and policies (Hewstone, 1996).

### Foreign Recruits

The most susceptible targets of de-recruitment may be foreign recruits. Many who have left their homes in Europe and the United States to join ISIS claim to not join with the intent of fighting. Some allege that they are attracted to the opportunities presented, but not the violence. For this reason, their superego may not be yet rigidified and more susceptible to promising enticement outside of the group.

One possible tactic may be to “de-recruit” them from ISIS in the same ways they were initially recruited; persuade that their current identity is misguided under the teachings of the Qur’an.; possibly appeal to their id and longing for purpose or identity through videos, outreach, and opportunity. This is what ISIS advertises; if anti-ISIS leaders advertise the same opportunity, then there may be a chance at disassociation.

Hence, the same psychological tactics that are used to entice them could be used to induce them to withdraw.

If this were to occur, actual opportunity ought to be presented, not just the illusion. For example, once these fighters have been disassociated, productive placements for them may be in trade schools and other educational strategies to develop skills to become constructive members of society, since they are seeking identity, purpose, and community. The tactic of providing education and a community may foster a salient identity that is consistent with a peaceful lifestyle.

Daniel E. Agbiboa (2015), applies Tajfel's social identity theory to that Boko Haram, and suggests that many of the recruited fighters are young people who feel lost within society. Due to economic inequality, poverty, unemployment, and lack of basic human needs, their psychological needs are not being met. The search for identity stems from a lack of economic opportunity and, thus, ways to feel productive in society.

Boko Haram offers a purpose in promising prosperity in the afterlife. Hence, an attainable purpose in this life ought to be presented, or an outlet for the id to act upon urges against those by which the individual has been offended in a non-violent environment; provide constructive outlets of expression that Crosby mentions may have been blocked from extropunitives engaging in violence against society. Since it may not be realistic to suggest merely devoting resources to economic improvement, one tactic could be to focus aid on social and psychological development. This may be pursued by building communities, social structures, and opportunities for productive expression of grievances. However, this recommendation must be nuanced by the acknowledgement that it may require immense resources.

## Conclusion

As established, the matter in question is not whether acts of terrorism are heinous, destructive, and terrifying. Rather, the question is how the psyches of individual perpetrators allow them to engage in such acts that oppose a globally accepted belief system that denounces extreme violence. This thesis has explored various dynamics as to what may be psychologically occurring that allows for this behavior.

An exploration between the interplay of psychological theories, such as the divisions of personality, and those of social psychology, such as the social identity theory, has shown that there may be psychological dynamics occurring to account for extremist violence and intergroup conflict. Further, this thesis has attempted to disprove the notion that no reasoning lies behind extremist behavior. Instead, the inner dynamics of an individual's psychological development, identity, and environment may shape the reasoning behind extremist behavior and perceived stereotypes.

Insofar as Lasswell's theory of the triple-appeal principle and Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory hold, the source of extreme violence may stem from the dissatisfaction of the id and dynamics of personal identification. If the id is not satisfied, then it may act out in various manners such as vicarious retribution and moral indignation, or protect itself by using defense mechanisms. Likewise, if one's identity is threatened, similar protective actions may be pursued, which may lead to the engagement in violent acts.

If social psychologists can explore the dynamics that may account for violent behavior, then recommendations on how to lessen violent episodes may be formed. This thesis has addressed a few potential methods of intervention to decrease violent tendencies

and weaken negative perceptions, such as the contact hypothesis. Again, it would be important to account for the underlying psychological dynamics that may be at play when creating an environment for contact between antagonistic individuals or groups. It may prove to be important to consider the dynamics that have been outlined when devising future methods of prevention and dissociation.

This being said, ample room still exists for more research in order to strengthen the arguments laid out in this thesis. This would require access to individuals who exhibit extremist mentality. Tailored interviews may bring to light the psychological dynamics that have been theorized. However, it must be acknowledged that this type of access may be rare. Further, each case of extremist behavior and mindset ought to be taken on a case-by-case basis. The combination of dynamics at play may differ frequently, since the socialization of every individual is different.

Lastly, further research ought to focus on the psychological dynamics of extremist behavior rather than their espoused motives. As this thesis has attempted to illuminate, subconscious motivations and factors may lead to violent outbreaks. Subconscious elements may be the key to dismantling the rigidified belief structures of extremist behavior, intergroup conflict, and negative perceptions.

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