

## **The Role of Entitativity in Perpetuating Cycles of Violence**

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Why do people engage in suicide terrorism? In his target article, Whitehouse summarizes a comprehensive research program devoted to answering one aspect of this question. Whitehouse focuses on why terrorists will sacrifice their own life for the benefit of their group, arguing that a sense of group fusion—fostered through shared dysphoric events—explains their willingness to make this ultimate sacrifice. But other puzzles of violent extremism remain. For example, why do terrorists feel vindicated carrying out their attacks against innocent bystanders? And why is current-day violent extremism so often rooted in ancient disputes involving past generations?

Here, we outline a broader perspective on violent extremism that addresses these questions and adds another dimension to Whitehouse's contribution using the psychological concept of *entitativity*—the perception of group members as a single entity (Campbell, 1958). Whereas fusion captures the oneness that individuals feel towards their in-group, entitativity applies to entitative perceptions of any group (see Lickel et al., 2000). Entitativity theory, therefore, can explain the puzzle of why people will engage in self-sacrificial behavior against uninvolved outgroups and across generations, causing continued cycles of violence.

### **Out-Group Entitativity and Vicarious Revenge**

Typically, a conflict erupts between two parties with an initial act of aggression that is followed by revenge. But acts of violent extremism, including suicide terrorism, have a unique structure in which retaliation for some perceived offense is directed at innocent bystanders. Consider the events of 9/11. Al-Qaeda claimed that their attack was in retaliation to the U.S. government's support of Israel and the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, yet their attacks targeted civilians who were not involved in these events. Violent extremism often involves such acts of “vicarious revenge”—retaliation directed towards individuals not involved in an initial conflict (see Jackson, Choi, & Gelfand, in press; Lee, Gelfand, & Shteynberg, 2013).

Past research suggests that vicarious revenge can be traced to perceptions of out-group entitativity. When out-groups are perceived as a single entity, all members of a group are seen as equally blameworthy—and substitutable—for an offense committed by the group. For example, if a street gang is viewed as highly entitative, the whole gang is also seen as responsible for one member's wrongdoing (Denson, Lickel, Curtis, Stenstrom, & Ames, 2006). Out-group entitative perceptions can have damaging consequences. After the American Columbine mass shootings, the shooters' families were perceived as entitative with the shooters themselves, which led to overt aggression and death threats (Lickel, Schmader, & Hamilton, 2003). When applied to violent extremism, this suggests terrorists view innocent out-group members as entitative with more culpable out-group members and equally deserving of revenge. These perceptions of out-group entitativity allow terrorists to rationalize unjustifiable acts of aggression against blameless individuals.

### **Trans-Generational Entitativity and the Persistence of Conflict Across Generations**

Cycles of violent extremism are often rooted in ancient conflicts involving long-deceased individuals. These conflicts can often revolve around historical religious figures (in the case of

Islamic extremists fighting on behalf of the prophet Muhammad), biblical conflicts (in the case of Hamas and Israeli radicals), or extinct political systems or figures (in the case of Neo-Nazism). Nevertheless, violent extremists give up their life for these historical groups and individuals in the same way they might give up their life for their current-day family or battalion.

Past research on trans-generational entitativity may explain this paradoxical behavior. Perceptions of an in-group as trans-generational—as a totality of past, present, and future members—has been found to increase willingness to endure losses for the benefit of the group's posterity (Kahn, Klar, and Roccas, 2017). Groups perceived to have essential qualities and histories that are passed down trans-generationally facilitate stronger esteem for one's in-group (Sani et al., 2007; Sani, Bowe, & Herrera, 2008), and greater opposition to out-groups (Warner, Kent, & Kiddoo, 2016; Jetten & Wohl, 2011; Smeeke & Verkuyten, 2014). Moreover, stories about conflicts that get passed down across generations get increasingly biased, with ingroup blame minimized and outgroup blame accentuated over time (Lee, Gelfand & Kashima, 2014), further escalating conflicts over time. A trans-generational group perception can explain why cycles of revenge often persist and escalate across multiple generations (Lee et al., 2014; Stillwell, Baumeister, & Del Priore, 2008); and why fused extremists sacrifice themselves for the sake of in-group members who lived long before they were born.

By applying past literature on entitativity, we show how Whitehouse's research on fusion could be integrated into a broader theory of how group perceptions influence violent extremism. When individuals perceive their entitative in-groups as strongly interconnected with the past and future, it guides them to make extraordinary sacrifices on behalf of their groups. On the other hand, when they perceive out-groups as entitative, they will rationalize acts of aggression against innocent out-group members. Fusion, out-group entitativity, and trans-generational entitativity are all processes that are needed in combination to understand the puzzle of violent extremism. These largely separate lines of research all have in common basic perceptual processes that lead to the recognition of groups as cohesive entities based on their shared essential features. Future research is needed to examine the interrelationship among these different perceptual processes and the factors that can break these cycles of conflicts.

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