
Weak Personal Ideals Incline Proud People Towards Religious Radicalization in Anxious Circumstances

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This research brief describes results of our experimental and correlational studies conducted between 2011 and 2019 on how weak personal ideals, high self-esteem, and uncertain circumstances combine to cause states conducive to aggressive religious radicalization. Despite theoretical speculation about the importance of these variables since the middle of last century, only scattered empirical research has investigated how combinations (of two) of them affect religious radicalization. The present research is the first to investigate all three variables simultaneously. Past research has typically found that experimentally manipulated uncertainty threats cause moral rigidity and extremism, especially among people with high self-esteem (reviewed in Jonas et al., 2014). We went beyond this past research by assessing weak ideals as an additional vulnerability to radicalization. In most of the studies summarized here, we assessed participants' self-esteem and the extent to which their lives were guided by personal ideals. We then randomly assigned them to experience either uncertainty-related threatening or less threatening conditions. We expected those with weak ideals and high self-esteem in the threatening conditions to be especially extreme and belligerent about their religious convictions and related moral stances. Our premise was that where strong personal ideals are absent, radical ideals should be more able to take root. To the extent that strong personal ideals are necessary buffers against the appeal of radicalization, policy efforts to decrease radicalization that focus mostly on encouraging people to focus on practical and secular inducements will miss the mark.

Perfect Storm: Weak Personal Ideals, High Self-Esteem, and Uncertainty-Related Threats

Classic personality and existential theories of human development converge on the idea that authoritarianism and narcissistic rigidity arise from the discomfort with personal uncertainty that comes from having weak personal ideals. People with weak ideals lack organizing principles to guide decision-making, self-regulation, and self-integrity (reviewed in McGregor et al., 2015). The general idea across classic theories of young-adult development is that weak personal ideals leave people open to the allure of aggressively enforced, externally-referenced norms. The external authority of the norms is appealing because it provides a surrogate kind of confidence. People need some way to make choices in life about what to do and who to be. If authentic personal ideals are not available to guide choices, then people will borrow ideals from somewhere else. To make sure the borrowed ideals will not let them down people with weak personal ideals cleave to externally-referenced norms that present as devoid of ambiguity or weakness. These zealous, borrowed ideals, however, still tend to leave people prone to worry they might not be good enough. Beneath the mask of zeal is an unsettled feeling of arbitrariness because a grounding sense of personal integrity is lacking. The tension between these unsettled feelings, and the explicit conviction expressed, fuels a defensive cycle in which people belligerently seize on extreme and exaggeratedly proud convictions about their inauthentic identity claim (and the worldviews and people who support it). Doing so keeps doubts at bay by riveting focus onto the group-supported idea that they are great and right. Classic theories of narcissism and authoritarianism accordingly imply that people with weak ideals and extremely high self-esteem should be most inclined to flare up into black-and-white extremes of rage and worldview zeal when they are confronted by personal uncertainties that expose their vulnerability (McGregor et al., 2005; McGregor & Jordan, 2007). Contrary to the

popular view of high self-esteem as a panacea, there is considerable evidence that its benefits are mostly personal, related to the individual feeling good and taking initiative (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Baumeister & Vohs, 2018). Beyond that, high self-esteem can also have a social dark side. People who see themselves as highly worthy and valuable feel more entitled to demean and aggress against others who undermine that sense of specialness, and also are more inclined toward assertive and aggressive responses to threats, in general (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Jonas et al., 2014). Decades of research on uncertainty-related threats have found that they do indeed cause various religious zeal and worldview-extreme reactions, especially among people with high self-esteem (reviewed in Jonas et al., 2014). Such findings have resulted after exposure to diverse uncertainty-related threats such as reminders of death or of relationship or academic uncertainties. The present research assesses the joint effects of all three variables on outcomes related to religious radicalization. Study 1 focuses on religious belligerence. Study 2 focuses on callous treatment of moral violators. Study 3 focuses on psychological variables related to aggressive religious radicalization (i.e., social dominance orientation and authoritarianism). Each study tested the hypothesis that among high self-esteem participants exposed to uncertainty-related distress, identity-weakness would significantly predict tendencies toward defensive religious radicalization.

Study 1

The 456 research participants in Study 1 were Canadian undergraduates (age, $M = 20$, two thirds female) with diverse self-described religious identifications: 27% Christian, 24% Muslim, 24% other (Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh), and 27% non-religious. Weak ideals were operationalized by low scores on a personal idealism scale characterized by items such as, “I see myself as someone who is primarily striving to reach my ideal self to fulfill my hopes, wishes, and aspirations;” “I often think about the person I would ideally like to be in the future.” Self-esteem was measured with items such as, “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself” and “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.” We experimentally manipulated the anxious-uncertainty threat in two different ways in two separate studies, and also measured religious zeal differently in the two studies. The results revealed the same pattern regardless of the different manipulations and measures, however, so we collapsed the data and conducted a single analysis for economy of presentation and more statistically reliable and generalizable effects.

For the first threat manipulation we randomly assigned participants to focus on stressful (vs. benign) economic projections that would affect all aspects of their life and goals. For the second we randomly assigned participants to focus on their own (vs. an acquaintance’s) close relationship uncertainties. The first measure of religious zeal focused on religious belligerence and extremism, with items including, “If I was convinced God wanted me to do something extreme I would do it,” and “I would support a war to defend my religion.” The second focused on the perception that God gives strength, with items including, “God makes me powerful,” “God give me courage to take on the world,” and “I get my strength from God.”

A regression analysis revealed a significant, weak-ideals x high self-esteem x uncertainty-threat, three-way interaction effect on religious zeal, $p = .002$ (the three-way interactions were significant in each of the two individual experiments). Overall, the simple effect of threat on religious zeal for participants who had both weak ideals and high self-esteem

was also significant ($p = .001$), and the weak-ideals/high self-esteem combination was the only one of the four possible combinations of those variables in which there was a significantly heightened religious zeal reaction to the threat.

Further, in support of our main hypothesis, that weak ideals would predict more religious zeal, specifically among participants in the threat condition who were also high in self-esteem, there was a significant ($p = .0004$) simple effect of weak ideals on religious zeal. Importantly, weak ideals did not predict significantly more religious zeal in any of the other three possible combinations of threat (present vs. absent) and self-esteem (high or low).

Study 2

The 258 participants in Study 2 were a sample of predominantly Christian-identifying American adults (age, $M = 30$; half female) who completed the experimental materials in exchange for a small amount of money. In contrast to the college-educated sample in Study 1, none of the participants in Study 2 had graduated from college. They completed the same measures of identity-weakness and self-esteem as in Study 1 and then were either randomly assigned to an uncertainty-threat condition in which they wrote about their own death, or to a less-threatening condition in which they wrote about dental pain. This writing-about-death (vs. dental pain) exercise has caused anxious uncertainty and moral rigidity in dozens of past experiments (reviewed in Jonas et al., 2014). To bolster the religious zeal results of Study 1 with converging evidence for rigid moral belligerence, Study 2 assessed whether the same three variables as in Study 1 would make participants more callous and unwilling to forgive or try to rehabilitate moral deviants (who were already in jail with no chance of parole).

As in Study 1, there was a significant three-way interaction ($p = .03$) characterized by the most belligerent refusal to forgive and help moral deviants among participants with weak ideals and high self-esteem who were in the uncertainty threat condition. Unlike in Study 1, the simple effect of threat on belligerence among participants with weak ideals and high self-esteem was not significant (perhaps because writing about dental pain also caused some distress).

Consistent with the results of Study 1, however, among participants in the threat condition who were also high in self-esteem, there was a significant ($p = .0002$) effect of weak ideals on belligerent refusal to forgive or help deviants. Importantly, as in Study 1, weak ideals did not predict belligerence in any of the other three possible combinations of threat (present vs. absent) and self-esteem (high vs. low).

Study 3

Study 3 participants were 449 undergraduates with similar demographic characteristics as in Study 1. The measures of weak ideals and self-esteem were the same as in Studies 1 and 2, but Study 3 used a self-report scale to measure participants' stress over the past few weeks (instead of experimentally manipulating it as in Studies 1 and 2). The proxies for radicalization assessed in Study 3 were the two main attitudinal tendencies that have been associated with various extreme and aggressive political and worldview stances in past research—social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism (SDO and RWA; Jackson & Gaertner, 2010). Items on the SDO scale included, "some groups of people must be kept in their place,"

and “some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups.” Items on the RWA scale included, “What our world really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil,” and “the only way our world can get through the crises ahead is to get back to traditional values, put some tough leaders in power, and silence the radicals who spread bad ideas.” We assessed whether the combination of identity-weakness, high self-esteem, and stress, that caused religious zeal and moral belligerence in Studies 1 and 2, would predict more favourable endorsement of SDO and RWA scale items.

As in Studies 1 and 2, there were significant three-way interactions characterized by the highest scores on both SDO ($p = .004$) and RWA ($p = .003$) among participants with weak ideals and high self-esteem who were also under high stress. A composite measure of SDO and RWA averaged together (they correlated at $r = .38$) revealed that, as in Study 1, the simple effect of stress significantly predicted SDO/RWA ($p = .05$) only among participants who had weak ideals and were high in self-esteem.

The test of the main hypothesis also revealed that, as in Studies 1 and 2, the simple effects of weak ideals on more SDO and RWA ($p = .004$ collapsed, $p = .01$ for only RWA, $p = .02$ for only SDO) were only present among proud participants who were under stress (i.e., not among any of the other combinations of esteem (high vs. low) or stress (high vs. low)).

Summary and Policy Implications

Together, the results of three studies highlight the importance of weak personal ideals as a vulnerability for religious radicalization. Weak ideals significantly predicted more religious and moral belligerence in circumstances that have been linked to extremism by experimental research over the past several decades (i.e., among proud participants in uncertain circumstances). These results suggest that policies to promote prosocial personal ideals could help inoculate people against the appeal of defensively proud, moral rigidity and religious radicalization. In all three studies, participants with strong personal ideals did not seize on religious or moral belligerence in threatening circumstances, but the people with weak ideals did.

Including emphasis on helping people strengthen their prosocial personal ideals may be a more effective strategy for reducing the appeal of radicalization than focusing solely on the secular-pragmatic benefits of non-radical integration with mainstream society. The Canadian government’s [current understanding of preventive factors](#) focuses mostly on relatively non-idealistic sources of purpose, such as belonging, employment, school, sports, cultural activities. Such secular-pragmatic inducements may miss the mark for people who are vulnerable to radicalization, however. Meaning seeking people are especially reliant on idealistic values for their equanimity (McGregor et al., 2022). Indeed, sociologist Scott Atran (2015) concluded from interviews with terrorists that radicalization flourishes where ideals are weak and frustrations are high, and that “sacred value must be fought with other sacred values.” He identifies religious radicals’ common psychological profile as follows:

most have had no traditional religious education, and are often “born again” into a socially tight, ideologically narrow...religious mission... Violent extremism represents not the resurgence of traditional cultures, but their collapse, as young people unmoored from millennial traditions flail about in search of a social identity that gives personal significance and glory.

Classic developmental-psychological theory, contemporary experimental-psychological research, and sociological field research are converging on the conclusion that weak personal ideals are a risk factor for radicalization. Beyond suggesting approaches to community development and de-radicalization that facilitate the strengthening of prosocial personal ideals, this convergence could provide insight into how to effectively negotiate with partners from groups or that have a stake in radical views. Strategies that emphasize rational/pragmatic inducements may be surprisingly ineffective, because they risk offending the essential, idealistic scaffolding that defines the group, while also not providing an alternative pathway for engagement with more prosocial and less extreme ideals. Communications that give radicalized partners an off-ramp to benign ideals may be more effective than those that focus solely on pragmatic, secular integration.

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