
The We in Me. Considering Terrorist Desistance from a Social Identity Perspective.

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Abstract

At present, the issue of leaving terrorism behind is a widely discussed but poorly understood subject. When compared to the extensive body of literature on the process of radicalization, research on terrorist desistance is both theoretically and conceptually lagging behind. As a consequence, policy makers and practitioners are currently operating in a theoretical vacuum. This article aims to address the pressing need for a better understanding of the discontinuance of terrorism by introducing a social identity perspective to the existing field of re-search. Social identity can be understood as the part of an individual's self-concept that is derived from membership within personally relevant social groups. As such, the concept of social identity is vital to making sense of the identity transformation intrinsic to walking away from terrorism. Exploring the role of social identity in terrorist desistance gives prominence to the intersection between the individual and the social group. Framing terrorist discontinuance as a process that emanates from the interface between individual and group-level mechanisms corresponds to the interactive nature of rebuilding a life after terrorism. Additionally, the explanatory value of a social identity perspective has already been demonstrated in the field of radicalisation research. Extending this theoretical framework to the subject of terrorist desistance enables us to connect the dots between two processes that are inherently linked, though frequently analysed as isolated entities.

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Introduction

Terrorism is seemingly omnipresent in our society. In recent years, the phenomenon has clawed its way into our daily lives and subsequently forced itself upon many national and international agendas. More often than not, acts of terrorism are depicted as erratic and

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appalling outbursts of violence. The unique combination of theatricality, bloodshed and apparent irrationality continues to baffle the general public. Terrorism raises many questions and has consequently inspired a spate of scientific research into the subject. In order to make sense of the senseless, much effort has been devoted to laying bare the roots of politicized violence. However, understanding the causes of terrorist activity is only half the picture. Terrorist involvement not only comes into being, at some point this engagement comes to an end (Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009). Yet the opposite end of the terrorist life cycle has been far less extensively examined (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013; Mullins, 2010; Windisch, Simi, Ligon, & McNeel, 2016). Strictly speaking, this issue has only been gaining academic momentum since 2009 (Windisch, Simi, Ligon, & McNeel, 2016), following two influential publications by Horgan (2009) and Bjorgo and Horgan (2009).

Despite this surge of interest, the field of terrorist discontinuance remains both conceptually and theoretically underdeveloped. As for the terminology, the concepts of disengagement and deradicalization have been the subject of swelling criticism (Clubb, 2015; Marsden, 2016; Lynch, 2015). In lieu of these ill-defined terms, the present article opts for the all-embracing notion of desistance from terrorism. Even though this concept is anything but undisputed (Bushway & Paternoster, 2014), the added value of using desistance as a point of reference lies in the fact that the term favours a multidimensional, comprehensive and processual appreciation of the phenomenon at hand (Lynch, 2015; Bubolz & Simi, 2015). For the purposes of this article, the term desistance is taken to mean “*a long-term abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in persistent patterns of criminal offending. The focus here is not on the transition or change, but rather on the maintenance of crime-free behavior in the face of life’s obstacles and frustrations*” (Maruna, 2001, p. 26). The crime in question is not confined to acts of politicized violence, but includes the supporting activities that make terrorist violence possible (Lynch, 2015). Regarding the theorization of terrorist discontinuance, a coherent theoretical framework is still a long way off (Glazzard, 2017; Marsden, 2016; Clubb, 2015). As concerns the question of desistance from terrorism, unmistakable progress has been made over the past decade. However, it is

apparent that the present theoretical endeavours only scratch the surface of the problem (Harris, 2015; Marsden, 2016). What we know, or think we know, about abandoning terrorist commitments is more or less fragmentary and desperately calls for further elaboration. In short, the pursuit of a solid theoretical foundation would definitely benefit the field.

In order to deepen our understanding of the process, a social identity approach to the issue of terrorist desistance is put forth. The social identity perspective is commonly recognized as a long-standing and universal frame of reference. The indicated research tradition has been empirically validated and replicated in many different contexts (Spears, 2011). Moreover, the social identity approach has a considerable record of performance in shedding new light on theoretical propositions (Hornsey, 2008). Generally speaking, our understanding of the role of identity in the process of desisting from terrorism is rather limited (Dean, 2017; Barrelle, 2010). This runs contrary to recent developments in the literature on desistance from crime (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014; Bushway & Paternoster, 2014; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) and to the application of identity issues to the study of terrorist involvement (Simi, Bubolz, & Hardman, 2013; Barrelle, 2010). Accordingly, this article aims to address this hiatus by viewing what we know about terrorist desistance through the prism of social identity.

The Terrorist Endgame: A State of the Art

In recent years, the issue of parting ways from a life of terrorism has amassed a significant scholarly audience (Windisch, Simi, Ligon, & McNeel, 2016). Despite this ever expanding interest, our comprehension of how one comes to give up terrorist involvement is still in a nascent state. An assessment of this relatively young field of inquiry reveals that two themes run as connecting threads throughout this scholarly niche, namely the debate between deradicalization and disengagement and the push-pull framework.

Disengagement and Deradicalization

To begin with, the distinction between disengagement and deradicalization is a defining feature of the field. That is, the monolithic notion of terrorist discontinuance is analytically split up in cognitive and behavioural subprocesses (Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009). The term disengagement typically refers to behavioural aspects associated with stepping down from terrorism (Windisch, Simi, Ligon, & McNeel, 2016; Schuurman & Bakker, 2016; Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez, & Boucek, 2010). Deradicalization, on the other hand, principally concerns the cognitive dimension of this process (Entenmann, van der Heide, Weggemans, & Dorsey, 2015; Harris, 2015; Schuurman & Bakker, 2016). Although apparently straightforward, this terminological divide has proven to be a great source of confusion in the field of research. First of all, both terms have been delineated in a number of different ways. For instance, concepts such as attitudes (Clubb, 2015), values (Bubolz & Simi, 2015), beliefs (Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez, & Boucek, 2010) or psychological disengagement (Barrelle, 2010) are stockpiled under an all-purpose conceptualization of deradicalization. On top of that, the same term is also used to describe the complete process of leaving terrorism behind, encompassing both behavioural and cognitive dimensions (Demant, Slotman, Buijs, & Tillie, 2008) or even to label attempts aimed at preventing radicalization, essentially confounding policy and process (Schmid, 2013; Clubb, 2015). In addition, the concept of deradicalization is built on shaky foundations, given that the process of radicalization is, in itself, an ill-defined and disputed term (Berger, 2016; Bötticher, 2017; Sageman, 2017). Not only is the definition of deradicalization and disengagement remarkably fuzzy, the terms are also used interchangeably and inconsistently (Glazzard, 2017; Lynch, 2015; Bubolz & Simi, 2015). The terminology is further muddled by the adoption of various other constructs (Marsden, 2016), such as defection (Bubolz & Simi, 2015), deprogramming (Schmid, 2013) or reintegration and rehabilitation (Marsden, 2016). Consequently, the research field finds itself in a permanent state of terminological disarray, rendering its own concepts effectively meaningless.

This inadequate conceptualisation, as sketched above, has not kept the distinction between disengagement and deradicalization from profoundly influencing the field. Teasing apart the cognitive and behavioural components of separating oneself from terrorist involvement has sparked the question which of the two dimensions matters most in preventing re-engagement (van der Heide & Huurman, 2016; Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez, & Boucek, 2010). This to-ing and fro-ing about the relative importance of deradicalization and disengagement has also been requalified as the attitudes-behaviour debate (Clubb, 2015). Proponents of the idea of disengagement argue that changing behaviour takes primacy over changing beliefs, on account of violence being the bottom-line problem (Berger, 2016). Furthermore, it is claimed that the renunciation of violence does not depend upon the rejection of ideas or worldviews that justify terrorist activity (Schuurman & Bakker, 2016; Schmid, 2013; Clubb, 2015). Advocates of deradicalization nevertheless maintain that the abandonment of extremist beliefs is imperative to “*permanently defuse the threat posed by these individuals*” (Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez, & Boucek, 2010, p. xiv). Settling for behavioural change runs the risk that, under different circumstances, disengaged militants chose to pick up the thread where they previously left it (La Palm, 2017).

All things considered, the attitudes-behaviour debate has failed to engage with the concepts of deradicalization and disengagement in a way that enriches our understanding of either construct. The discussion focuses exclusively on what sets both dimensions apart (Clubb, 2015). Accordingly, what ties both processes together is a notable blind spot in this field of research (Harris, 2015; Windisch, Simi, Ligon, & McNeel, 2016). What is more, the distinction is furnished with assumptions about the causal relationship between attitudes and behaviour essentially framing terrorist desistance as a process that either hinges completely on a change in beliefs or is altogether disconnected from a shift in attitudes. Reality is, per contra, more nuanced than this (Clubb, 2015). The current conceptualisation and subsequent compartmentalization of terrorist discontinuance, though not strictly adhered to by each and every scholar (see for instance Horgan, 2009), does in fact shape our view of how the process takes place. By the same token, this imperfect representation feeds back into the assessment

of what effective interventions should look like. A case in point is the implicit assumption that guides a number of deradicalization programmes. That is, interventions aimed at explicitly deradicalizing individuals presuppose that violent beliefs give rise to violent deeds and, accordingly, adjusting these corruptive beliefs will bring about a change in behaviour (Marsden, 2016; Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Clubb, 2015). Put differently, the argument supporting this type of intervention amounts to nothing more than reasoning in a circle between radicalization and deradicalization (Lynch, 2015). The assumed causality between attitudes and acts in either direction is simply ungrounded (Ferguson, 2016). A final reminder of the improper conceptualisation in this research domain is the reductionist nature of the term deradicalization in particular, “*which (...) positions the ‘problem’ in the head of the individual*” (Marsden, 2016, p. 10) without further regard for situational or social aspects (de Graaf & Weggemans, 2016).

The Push-Pull Framework

The second line of inquiry that currently defines the field is the push-pull framework. In essence, the model envisions the decision to retire from a terrorist group as a function of push and pull factors (Schuurman & Bakker, 2016). Push factors induce aversion against terrorist involvement, whereas pull factors underscore the alluring features of a life beyond militancy (Schuurman & Bakker, 2016; van der Heide & Huurman, 2016; La Palm, 2017). This interpretation of the disengagement process was first introduced in the work of Aho (1988). More recently, the framework has been further developed by Bjorgo and Horgan (2009). The model by Altier and colleagues (2014) now stands as the leading frame of reference in the field (van der Heide & Huurman, 2016; La Palm, 2017).

As follows, the research on terrorist desistance has been primarily absorbed by the question “what moves an individual to break away from terrorism?” (Harris, 2015; van der Heide & Huurman, 2016). A systematic review of the literature on disengagement by Windisch and colleagues (2016) has revealed that violence, disillusionment and actual confinement or the threat thereof are the most frequently cited push factors, whereas social

relationships, employment and education embody the most prevailing pull factors. Disillusionment, above all, is marked as a recurrent theme in the research (La Palm, 2017; Harris, 2015; Dean, 2017). Furthermore, it is generally recognized that the decision to disengage does not rest on one argument, but is de facto connected to a number of considerations (Barrelle, 2015; Schuurman & Bakker, 2016; Horgan, Altier, Shortland, & Taylor, 2017). Various factors that either endorse a prolonged membership or push for leave-taking are weighed up against each other in a crude cost-benefit analysis (Harris, 2015; Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez, & Boucek, 2010). The decision to disengage is additionally shaped by the presence of acceptable alternatives and the size of the costs sunk into terrorist involvement (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014; Horgan, Altier, Shortland, & Taylor, 2017). As yet, the relative weight of each of these factors in the decision-making process is largely uncharted (Harris, 2015). The finding that push factors are typically more decisive than pull factors has nevertheless been reiterated in several studies (van der Heide & Huurman, 2016; La Palm, 2017). However, one should not downplay the role of pull factors in the decision to give up terrorism (Windisch, Simi, Ligon, & McNeel, 2016). Without a viable alternative for terrorist engagement, choosing to terminate one's membership is anything but a clear-cut matter (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014).

As a theoretical point of departure, the push-pull model carries much weight within this research domain (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014). The framework is of particular use in tracing back the reasons why an individual decides to walk away from terrorism (see Horgan, Altier, Shortland, & Taylor, 2017). Moreover, through the push-pull model, the field has come to understand the turn away from terrorist activity as a product of agency (Marsden, 2016). However, the framework falls flat when it comes to providing a comprehensive theoretical explanation for terrorist desistance. Specifically, the push-pull model is but a descriptive and superficial account of a multifaceted and deep-rooted process (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014). The cognitive mechanisms that underlie this form of self-change are gravely overlooked and even reduced to a paradigm of rational, machinelike deliberation (Harris, 2015; Lynch, 2015; Bubolz & Simi, 2015). On top of that, the decision to

disengage is a highly idiosyncratic matter, meaning that the causes identified in one case are not necessarily relevant to any other individual (Harris, 2015; Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014). Considering this limited transferability, the factors that are stated in this framework are by no means universal (Marsden, 2016). Moreover, disengagement or physically leaving the group is deemed to be the end of the line (Simi, Blee, DeMichele, & Windisch, 2017; Harris, 2015). As a result, success is in effect equated to the absence of conflict (McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016). Whether the individual subsequently manages to reintegrate peacefully into society is of no further concern (Marsden, 2016). Yet merely putting down the AK-47 and going home is a far cry from a complete process of desistance. As mentioned above, desistance is as much about sustaining the decision to turn one's life around as it is about terminating violent behaviour (Harris, 2015; Marsden, 2016).

In light of these limitations, a number of studies have moved beyond the push-pull framework. The most prominent examples are the Pro-Integration Model by Barrelle (2015) and the grounded theory of psychological disengagement by Harris (2015). As these theoretical advancements indicate, the research domain at hand is in a constant state of flux. Over the years, the field has gradually progressed from building theories from scratch tailored to the question of terrorist discontinuance (see Demant, Sloodman, Buijs, & Tillie, 2008) to bringing more general, pre-existing theories into play (see Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014; Williams & Lindsey, 2014). On the whole, the field is progressively stepping back from terrorist exceptionalism (Marsden, 2016). In preference to construing terrorist involvement as anomalous behaviour that calls for anomalous explanations (Dean, 2017), terrorist engagement and desistance are interpreted as extraordinary phenomena that are grounded in ordinary processes.

Thus far, this relatively young field has raised more questions than answers. What we currently know about desistance from terrorism is heavily coloured by both the push-pull model and the distinction between deradicalization and disengagement. As argued earlier, the terms used to describe the discontinuance of terrorism are living a life of their own. Likewise, the push-pull framework is a depthless explanation of the cessation of terrorist involvement.

Given the present state of knowledge, the field conveys a rather distorted image of the process of terrorist discontinuation. In order to broaden our understanding of desisting from terrorism and to flesh out the theoretical frames presented above, the following section turns to a well-established research tradition: the social identity approach.

The Social Identity Approach: An Overview

As the name suggests, the social identity perspective spans not one, but an assortment of related theories that are firmly rooted in the discipline of social psychology (Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008). Intergroup processes and social-psychological effects of group membership are at the very heart of this research tradition (Sindic & Condor, 2014), thereby placing itself right at the intersection between the individual and the group. The social identity approach emerged in response to perceived tendencies in the field of social psychology to examine processes that unfold between groups from an individualistic perspective (Hornsey, 2008; Spears, 2011). Dating back to the early seventies, the social identity perspective is first and foremost a longstanding research tradition that has greatly influenced our understanding of group-related phenomena and continues to do so up to this day (Hornsey, 2008; McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016; Sindic & Condor, 2014). The principles of social identity theory and self-categorization theory are set out hereafter.

Social Identity Theory

The somewhat elusive phenomenon of social identity is broken down by two prominent theories: social identity theory and self-categorization theory. Social identity theory is primarily concerned with intergroup processes (McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016; Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004), whereas self-categorization theory centres around the intragroup and intra-individual side of the process (Hornsey, 2008). The latter will be discussed later on.

Henri Tajfel, principal architect of the social identity theory, has described social identity as “*an individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership*” (McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016). Social identity, as opposed to personal identity, is the result of processes of social identification and social categorization (Spears, 2011). Social categorization refers to the fact that individuals categorize people into groups based on the characteristics they share as a way to catalogue the world around them (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These different groups are in turn stacked up against each other by their respective members in a process of social comparison (Spears, 2011). Along these lines, we characterize the groups we belong to, and which subsequently become a part of how we define ourselves, by contrasting them with other groups (Spears, 2011; Hornsey, 2008).

Social identification is thus what ties individuals to the social groups of which they are a part (Spears, 2011). Aside from bolstering group membership, social categorization and social comparison processes also bear meaning in a very different way. As made evident by the minimal group paradigm, the sole fact of being sorted into different categories is sufficient to provoke antagonism between these groups (McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016). In other words, social identification transforms how we define ourselves as well as how we define others (Hornsey, 2008).

What exactly drives people to engage in social identity processes is quite the bone of contention. Concerning the motivational aspect of social identity, the self-esteem hypothesis entails that social comparisons that favour the own group over a relevant out-group reinforces the associated social identity, thereby effectively enhancing self-esteem (Spears, 2011; McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016; Deaux, 1993). The optimal distinctiveness theory, on the other hand, argues that a positive social identity fulfils the basic human need of belonging while at the same time permitting the individual to retain a certain sense of uniqueness (Spears, 2011; Hornsey, 2008; Sindic & Condor, 2014). Lastly, the uncertainty-identity theory postulates that individuals resort to processes of social categorization as a means of countering existential uncertainty (McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016; Hogg, 2007).

Social identity theory, however, does not assume collective identities to be axiomatically satisfactory. In spite of appearance, social identity is deep down a theory of social change (Spears, 2011; Hornsey, 2008). Negative social comparisons can elicit disparate reactions from individuals (Sindic & Condor, 2014; Jenkins, 2014). If the boundaries between the damaged in-group and a more favourable out-group are perceived as traversable, the individual could opt to leave one collectivity for another in a process termed social mobility (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010; McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016; Sindic & Condor, 2014). When swapping sides is beyond the bounds of possibility, one could commit oneself to direct social competition with a view to changing the status quo (Spears, 2011; Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010; Sindic & Condor, 2014). Alternatively, the individual is left with the option of social creativity, which involves warping the social comparison process to a more positive outcome by adjusting the points of comparison (Spears, 2011; McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016; Sindic & Condor, 2014).

Self-Categorization Theory

As mentioned before, self-categorization theory examines how social identity lodges itself both within and between the minds of individuals (McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016; Hornsey, 2008). First off, self-categorization implies a process of self-stereotyping that is essentially the cognitive counterpart of the intergroup mechanisms described by social identity theory (Deaux, 1993; Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004). In pursuance of making this bewildering world somewhat more understandable, individuals mentally represent social categories as a myopic set of attributes, otherwise known as a prototype (Jenkins, 2014; McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016). If this mental image is held in common by the greater part of a social group, the prototype assumes the form of a stereotype (Hogg, 2014; McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016). Stereotypes, or preconceived notions about social categories, are subsequently internalised by the individual (Jenkins, 2014). Specifically, people strive to fit the pattern set out by their own group stereotypes (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010). In other words, the group has a shared understanding of what they are like and

members that identify with the group seek to match this image (McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016). This process of self-stereotyping or incorporating group-level definitions within one's sense of self eventually culminates into a state of depersonalization. This entails that, on average, the self is more readily described in terms of group membership (Baray, Postmes, & Jetten, 2009; Sindic & Condor, 2014). Consequently, people experience themselves as interchangeable with other members rather than as distinct individuals (Spears, 2011; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarthy, 1994; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Depersonalization is thus typified by a shift in salience between personal and social identities (Baray, Postmes, & Jetten, 2009; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarthy, 1994). Identity salience, as such, is determined by the accessibility of the identity in question and its relative "fit" to the surrounding world (Spears, 2011; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarthy, 1994). Accessibility refers to the inclination of an individual to adopt a specific social category and is in itself a function of preceding experiences and prevailing motives and expectations (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarthy, 1994; Sindic & Condor, 2014). Fit, on the other hand, concerns the link between a given social identity and the individual's perception of reality (Sindic & Condor, 2014). Social categorizations that are high in comparative fit are those that magnify the differences between the out-group and the in-group while minimizing the differences within the group (Spears, 2011; Hornsey, 2008). This foundation for identity salience is also known as the meta-contrast principle (Spears, 2011; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarthy, 1994). The second type of fit, normative fit, indicates the degree of consistency between the content of a certain social identity and one's personal beliefs about the facts of existence (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarthy, 1994; Spears, 2011).

Moreover, processes of self-categorization and identity salience are far from static. Identity is, so to speak, at the mercy of the social environments in which it subsists (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarthy, 1994). As long as contexts change, identities will change with them in order to reflect the individual's altering relationship to reality. On that account, individuals self-categorize differently in keeping with the various situations that come to pass (Jenkins, 2014; Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004). In fact, any person has a number of

meaningful identities, both personal and social, at his or her disposal that continuously go up against each other in a ceaseless game of relevance delineated by the present context (Sageman, 2017).

Lastly, self-categorization touches upon the subject of social influence (Spears, 2011). The concept of referent informational influence denotes that within a certain group, individuals look to its most prototypical members for directions on the group's norms and expectations (Spears, 2011; McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016; Sageman, 2017). Normative behaviour can thus be regarded as an expression of social identity (McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016; Stets & Burke, 2000). Correspondently, conformity is the curious emanation of both the socialisation and internalisation of collective norms, stemming from making group standards one's own rather than bulldozing people into compliance (McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016; Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004). Seeing that social influence operates primarily through self-categorization, influence is limited to norms and behaviour that are perceived as compatible with the group's stereotype (Sindic & Condor, 2014; Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010). In addition, adhering to group norms over an extended period of time can crystallize into a form of automatic cognition or habitual decision making (Harris, 2015; Simi, Blee, DeMichele, & Windisch, 2017).

Social Identity and Terrorism: A Tale of Threat and Defence

Social Identity and the Pathway Towards Terrorism

Considering that social identity theory is principally a theory of social change and collective action (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hornsey, 2008), making the leap to terrorist activity is hardly far-fetched. As a matter of fact, the social identity perspective has been hailed as a valuable frame of reference in explaining the turn to terrorist involvement (Barrelle, 2010; Sageman, 2017; Doosje, et al., 2016). The emergence of terrorism is, quite literally, entangled in processes of social identification and self-categorization. After all, "*only those who identify together can mobilize together*" (Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008, p. 1328).

Group-level psychological processes are key in understanding why individuals revert to politicized violence (Doosje, et al., 2016). Terrorist groups are generally formed at the very outskirts of society. Through processes of social comparison, people on the fringes find each other in a shared sense of frustration (Sageman, 2017; Kruglanski, Jasko, Chernikova, Dugas, & Webber, 2017). In line with the meta-contrast principle described by self-categorization theory, these individuals become aware that they resemble each other in terms of their frustrated needs more than they recognize themselves in the rest of the general public (Sageman, 2017). And so, a social group that defines itself in direct opposition to conventional society develops. This demarcation of what we are and what we are not induces further processes of social identification and subsequent self-categorization. Evidently, the formation of an oppositional group provokes a certain reaction from the community, more often than not in the form of outside categorization. As outlined by social identity theory, how a collectivity defines itself and how a collectivity is defined by the out-group are firmly interclasped processes (Jenkins, 2014). The group's collective identity is therefore heavily influenced by societal backlash. Consequently, the group embarks on a quest to legitimize itself (Berger, 2017). Deepened identification with the in-group goes hand in hand with a heightened dis-identification with the out-group, which effectively grows into a practice of delegitimizing the other category (Berger, 2017; Ingram, 2016). The moment the out-group is perceived as a threat to the in-group, this interdependent process of identity construction reaches a critical point (Berger, 2017; Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008). A vision of crisis is erected from pre-existing feelings of grievance, for which the out-group is held responsible (Ingram, 2016). Most often, a threatened identity is a particularly salient identity (Sageman, 2017; McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016), prompting these individuals to further latch on to their social identities. This grim representation of the out-group is starkly juxtaposed with a downright praiseful definition of the in-group (Kruglanski, Jasko, Chernikova, Dugas, & Webber, 2017). A collectivity that is thus typified by purity and virtue is by all means worthy of protection (Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008). Aggravating constructs of threat, vulnerability and crisis are eventually met with constructs that propagate violent solutions (Berger, 2017).

Given the perceived level of threat that is posed by the out-group, the survival of the in-group necessitates taking the offensive (Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008). Ultimately, the escalation from the acquisition of a certain social identity to a do-or-die situation that calls for a reign of terror is entwined with the context in which it takes place (Sageman, 2017). As such, the phenomenon of terrorism stems directly from the interweaving between individual and collectivity, embedded in an iterative process that feeds off the reaction of the out-group (Sageman, 2017). In short, the key mechanism in becoming a terrorist is to be found in a shift in salience from a more personal to a more social identity (Sageman, 2017; Barrelle, 2010; Baray, Postmes, & Jetten, 2009).

Identity, on top of providing the means for terrorist engagement, is a powerful motivating force when it comes to getting oneself involved in the first place. Several identity motives have been pointed out throughout the literature on radicalization. First, feelings of self-uncertainty could draw people to terrorist groups given that they are undeniably capable of providing someone with a clear-cut identity (Hogg, 2014). In the same way, terrorist involvement can be seen as the answer to deep-seated identity discrepancies (Simi, Bubolz, & Hardman, 2013). Moreover, membership of a terrorist organization entails certain benefits. For instance, these groups bestow companionship, belonging and a taste of significance upon their members (Doosje, et al., 2016; Kruglanski, Jasko, Chernikova, Dugas, & Webber, 2017). Individuals within a terrorist group are intrinsically equipped with a form of collective agency (Baray, Postmes, & Jetten, 2009; McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016). Terrorist involvement can therefore be a rewarding activity by and of itself (Kruglanski, Jasko, Chernikova, Dugas, & Webber, 2017).

A reading of the process of becoming a terrorist as specified above bears serious implications. As exemplified by the term radicalization, ideology is widely thought to be a prerequisite for terrorist engagement (Dean, 2017; Sageman, 2017; Ferguson, 2016). Contrary to this household conviction, beliefs are by no means causal (Marsden, 2016; Simi, Bubolz, & Hardman, 2013; Lynch, 2015). Social identity serves as a key mechanism in engendering terrorist engagement (Sageman, 2017). If anything, ideology serves more as a tool that binds

the different members of the group more together in that it is something that they have in common. Violent ideas alone do not necessarily bring about violent behaviour. It is collective identification that allows for collective action (Sageman, 2017). As a result, it takes a lot more than gushing violent messages to convert individuals into zealous militants (Glazzard, 2017; Ferguson, 2016). The individual itself, the social group and the enclosing context are all vital constituents of the progression towards terrorism.

Social Identity and Desistance from Terrorism

Along with shaping the outset of terrorist engagement, social identification plays a vital part in the process of desisting from terrorism. To what extent identity has a part in retracting oneself from this path, however, has been far less extensively examined (Barrelle, 2010). The following section aims to dig a little deeper into this matter.

Terrorist involvement is exclusively called into question in the face of threat (Harris, 2015). In this case, the threat pertains to the integrity of a person's sense of self. Any system of meaning is teeming with inconsistencies that, for the most part, tend to lie dormant (Higgins, 1987). That is, until a shift in the situation brings these issues to the surface. The awareness of inconsistencies in how one perceives the world and, by extension, how one perceives oneself to be sparks a process of self-verification (Harris, 2015). By assessing the coherence of different notions about the self, individuals hope to confirm the existing views they hold about themselves and, subsequently, to affirm the belief that their overall sense of self is consistent (Harris, 2015; Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011). Self-verification can take the form of a profound analysis of the self (Alicke, Zell, & Guenther, 2013) or of seeking out self-verifying feedback from relevant others (Swann & Buhrmester, 2012).

If the process of self-verification is unsuccessful in restoring a coherent sense of self, the individual typically goes through a sweeping state of self-discrepancy (Harris, 2015). The presence of many different levels of identity in a person's general sense of self implies many different possible sources of discrepancy, and thus many different kinds of self-discrepancy. Contradictions among self-construals can be roughly divided into two categories: maintaining

incompatible perceptions about the self and experiencing a violation of identity standards (Higgins, 1987; Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2011). The latter denotes a transgression of personally accepted norms or the nonfulfillment of meaningful desires and aspirations (Higgins, 1987). In other words, there is a glaring discrepancy between how people see themselves and how they imagined themselves to be (Marsden, 2016). These rather abstract cognitive disparities crop up in the form of feelings of disappointment and contempt (Higgins, 1987), as specified by the push-pull model above. Incidentally, self-discrepancy is connected to issues of identity salience. This manifest prominence of inconsistencies, seeing that they threaten the individual's psychological integrity, accentuates intra-group differences over intergroup differences. Similarly, the group's identity no longer matches up to the real world and, to that end, fails to meet the individual's expectations. Accordingly, the social identity at issue is found lacking in terms of normative as well as comparative fit. As self-categorization theory predicts, a cognitive reshuffle could very well ensue.

Self-discrepancy is usually accompanied by serious psychological distress (Harris, 2015; Higgins, 1987). Having to juggle outright conflicting self-construals instigates identity confusion and anxious uncertainty (Amiot, de la Sablonniere, Smith, & Smith, 2015; McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016). People simply struggle to define who they are (Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011). Concisely, self-discrepancy is a horrible state of being. Individuals therefore seek ways to manage their faltering sense of self (Harris, 2015; McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016). In this instance, two different threat-coping or defensive strategies are conceivable. One faces the dilemma of either reconciling oneself with the group or breaking away from the pack (Harris, 2015). When confronted with existential threat, one way of preserving a positive self-view is thus to restore the affiliation with the in-group (McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016; Swann & Buhrmester, 2012). This strategy is, to a certain degree, influenced by the ability to escape from the threat posed by a mismatched social identity (McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016; Barrelle, 2015). Cutting oneself loose from a terrorist group is anything but a given. Besides barriers imposed by the collectivity

(Harris, 2015), the individual quite possibly might have shackled him or herself to the group by willingly making sacrifices to acquire this particular social identity (Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011; Sageman, 2017). In order to resolve the discrepancy, one's personal identity is changed so that it no longer clashes with the collective identity (Higgins, 1987). Distancing oneself from the group, on the contrary, implies dis-identification with the collectivity and an inverse rearrangement of personal and social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Barrelle, 2015; Marsden, 2016). Terrorist discontinuance is, by its very nature, a function of identification. Those with low levels of identification, and correspondingly low levels of commitment, rarely hesitate to turn their back on the group in harsh times (Sageman, 2017). Clearly, the ties that bind are few and far between. As revealed by the concept of individual mobility in the theory of social identity, desisting from terrorism is as much a process of finding an alternative group as it is about departing from the erstwhile category (Marsden, 2016; Barrelle, 2015). To that effect, individuals engage in a process of anticipatory self-change (Alicke, Zell, & Guenther, 2013) in conjunction with projecting personal traits onto the prospective group (Amiot, de la Sablonniere, Smith, & Smith, 2015). After successfully parting company from the terrorist group, the individual finds him or herself in a situation of identity limbo (Jenkins, 2014). The discontinuities between the person's former social group and the new social category are at the forefront of ensuing identity processes. After a while, the different social identities are isolated and kept in separate compartments (Amiot, de la Sablonniere, Smith, & Smith, 2015). This particular frame of mind is also known as the in between worlds phenomenon (Harris, 2015). One's overarching sense of self is essentially composed of bits and pieces of both previous and new identities. To wit, no identity ever ceases to exist and no identity transformation is ever really finished. Identities that are as fundamental to one's self-concept as being a terrorist are expected to bear long-lasting consequences (Simi, Blee, DeMichele, & Windisch, 2017; Bosi & Uba, 2016; Giugni, 2008). Identity residual is therefore echoed in momentarily lapses or flashback episodes, in consequence of deeply entrenched and habitual cognitive processes (Simi, Blee, DeMichele, & Windisch, 2017; Harris, 2015). Surely the process of desistance is not about exorcising the terrorist within. Quite the opposite is true as,

for the sake of anyone's psychological well-being, the different fragments of one's identities are ideally integrated into a coherent and comfortable sense of self (Jenkins, 2014; McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2011). It is by connecting the dots and drawing links that various identity segments become assimilated in the underlying self (Amiot, de la Sablonniere, Smith, & Smith, 2015). Paradoxically, former terrorists must first come to terms with their past identity before they can move forward. A compartmentalized self is not a coherent self and thus crosses the need for continuity, essentially perpetuating the prior disruption of identity (Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011). In fact, this leaves a person vulnerable for re-engagement, as illustrated by the aforementioned identity motives for terrorist involvement.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article began with uncovering the present state of research in the field of terrorist discontinuance. As one could expect from a field that is still in its embryonic stages, the study of how one comes to give up terrorist engagement is both conceptually and theoretically underdeveloped. The distinction between deradicalization and disengagement is notably pervasive in this line of enquiry, but has failed to advance our understanding of this process in a meaningful way. The push and pull framework, on the other hand, stands as a useful starting point in the interpretation of terrorist discontinuance. However, this theoretical model is at most a superficial account of a convoluted issue and is, accordingly, in dire need of further elaboration. To that end, the present article has opted to bridge the gap by introducing the well-established social identity approach to the process of terrorist desistance. In essence, the social identity perspective is of particular use in elucidating the underlying cognitive mechanisms of this radical transformation. Processes of social identification and self-categorization are intrinsic to any group-related phenomenon and thus vital in making sense of the emergence and repudiation of terrorist involvement. As such, social identification is the key mechanism that drives desistance from terrorism. These processes describe what is going

on beneath the surface of push and pull factors and, in effect, tie this mishmash of distinctive arguments together. As follows, both the stages of getting involved in terrorist activity and stepping down from it are products of social identification. These processes are, unsurprisingly, related but nonetheless far from identical. Whereas terrorist engagement is marked by a shift in salience from more personal to more social identities, terrorist desistance requires the exact opposite. Joining a terrorist group revolves around perceived similarity, whereas leaving is grounded in the perception of fundamental differences. This means that when becoming part of a terrorist organization, there is a sense of continuity in terms of identity. Conversely, breaking away from terrorist involvement is characterized by a considerable discrepancy between identities. On top of the crushing psychological impact of leaving a part of oneself behind (Harris, 2015), desistance from terrorism is set apart by widely different structural opportunities in comparison to the outset of the terrorist life cycle. As a matter of fact, walking away from terrorism relies on processes that go beyond identification, specifically the notions of structure and agency (Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011; Kruglanski, Jasko, Chernikova, Dugas, & Webber, 2017; Barrelle, 2015). In many instances, the acquisition of a certain social identity is encouraged and rewarded by the group whereas the rejection of this identity is met with stigmatization and disdain on both sides. Moreover, desisting is determined by having the opportunity and necessary resources to withdraw from the organization (Barrelle, 2015). In sum, terrorist desistance rests on a distinguished interaction between processes of identity, structure and agency which, in turn, implies an entirely different dynamic when compared to terrorist emergence.

The implications of these results are nothing short of far-reaching. First of all, examining terrorist desistance from a social identity perspective unveils both the connection between the individual and the group and the interweaving of a person's mindset and behaviour. This interpretation of the process lies athwart of a categorical dichotomization between deradicalization and disengagement. Furthermore, as mentioned before, there is still a great deal of confusion with regard to the potential objectives of counterterrorist interventions and, especially, to what extent ideology should be addressed by these

programmes (Koehler, 2017). In point of fact, the social identity approach clearly demonstrates the role of ideology in the terrorist life-cycle to be more or less negligible. Focusing exclusively on changing beliefs is therefore of little use in preventing terrorist re-engagement. On the other hand, given the evident connection between identity, culture and religion, it stands to reason that it would be a misconception to dismiss ideological issues altogether. The point is that religion, or any other system of meaning for that matter, is not to be regarded as necessarily causal in connection to terrorist involvement, but should instead be viewed from the context of identity in which it operates and, accordingly, approached in a contextualized manner. Or rather, what ought to be the focus in dealing with terrorist engagement is highlighting the differences between group members themselves and underscoring the similarity or sameness between militant individuals and the out-group (Gadd, 2006). In addition, more attention should be paid to supportive structures that enable individuals to separate themselves from a life of terrorism. Any identity has to be made to matter (Jenkins, 2014), yet this aspect is at present gravely overlooked. On the contrary, the overly repressive responses that currently dominate the counterterrorist agenda (Paulussen, 2016; Entenmann, van der Heide, Weggemans, & Dorsey, 2015) are in blatant disregard of the principles of social identification. Blindly cracking down on terrorist engagement reinforces the image of the out-group as a threat. In the long run, any counterterrorist policy that offers nothing more than blunt search and destroy tactics is largely counterproductive.

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