



spotlight

THE RESILIENCE OF RADICALISM

Overcoming Psychological Defences in Deradicalisation Work

Why do some extremists deradicalise when confronted with counter-narratives or positive intergroup contact, while others entrench even deeper into their beliefs? While the external factors that pull people away from radical milieus are well documented, the internal psychological defences used to resist doubt are frequently overlooked. Drawing on interviews with former extremists, this Spotlight describes the unconscious defence strategies that allow radicalised individuals to reduce cognitive dissonance and sustain their extremist attitudes.

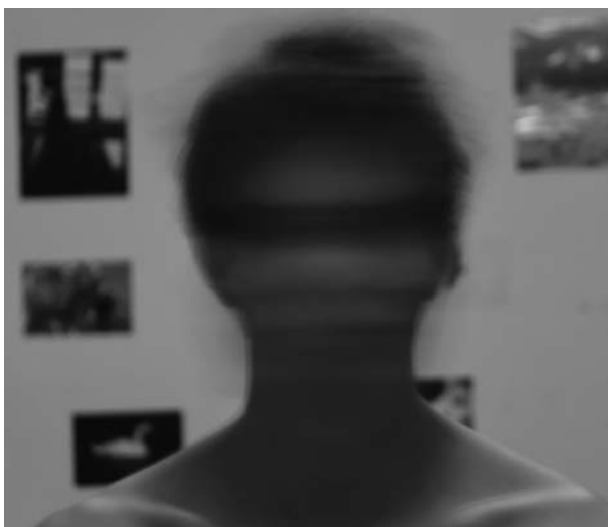


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Research on the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism (P/CVE) has long focused on 'push and pull' factors that drive individuals toward or away from extremism. We know that unmet expectations, fear of repression, isolation, or the allure of a normal life can pull people away from radical milieus. However, what is missing from this literature is a deeper understanding of the psychological processes that determine why these factors work for some individuals while leaving others unaffected.

Psychological experiments have long shown how inducing cognitive dissonance – the discomfort caused by conflicting thoughts, beliefs, or emotions – can successfully shift attitudes. P/CVE interven-

tions often implicitly rely on this mechanism, as most of the mentioned push and pull factors cause dissonance. However, radicalised individuals rarely relinquish their core beliefs easily. Instead, they usually exhibit what I term a 'resilience of radicalism' by employing specific, often unconscious strategies to reduce the discomfort of dissonance without abandoning extremism. By understanding these mechanisms, P/CVE practitioners can better anticipate and inhibit these rationalisations, and thus design more effective interventions.

THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF DISSONANCE

Under highly favourable circumstances, cognitive dissonance relating to a person's extremist attitudes can have a rapid disengaging effect. For example, Joanna, a Polish neo-Nazi, had a friendly positive encounter with a South Asian man during a trip to England, directly contradicting her white supremacist beliefs. Combined with favourable conditions – geographical distance from peers, concealed tattoos, and ongoing family support – this dissonance shattered her worldview, leading her to abandon the extremist group within weeks.

However, Joanna's story is an anomaly. More often, when confronted with their own hypocrisy, doubt, or conflicting emotions, radicalised individuals employ defensive coping strategies. For example, David, a Spanish neo-Nazi, developed a relationship with a woman he perceived as 'mixed race'. Rather than abandoning his ideology, he resolved the psychological discomfort by ending the relationship. He interpreted this as a heroic act of self-sacrifice, proving to himself that he was a 'truly worthy' National Social-

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Kurzweily, J. (2026). The Resilience of Radicalism: Strategies for reducing dissonance and sustaining extremist attitudes, *Journal for Deradicalization*. <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/1197>.



ist. These two examples illustrate how even positive intergroup contact, often touted as having high deradicalising potential, can sometimes backfire. Deradicalisation does not simply occur as a result of disruptive events and experiences – the push and pull factors – but as a result of what an individual makes of them.

STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINING EXTREMIST ATTITUDES

Facing contradictions, individuals use several strategies to alleviate psychological discomfort without significantly challenging their overarching extremist framework. As Leon Festinger posited, individuals may resolve dissonance by changing behavioural or environmental cognitive elements, or by adding new consonant cognitions. Building on Festinger and my research interviews, I identified five primary strategies radicalised individuals use to reduce dissonance and sustain extremist attitudes:

1) *Adding or adapting consonant or dissonant cognitions*: Individuals frequently maintain their extremism by introducing new justifications or adapting existing beliefs. For instance, when David served in the military, he noticed that several soldiers whom he categorised as ‘mixed race’ behaved very honourably. This contradicted his racist perception of these soldiers as inferior. To resolve this dissonance, he concluded that it must be their ‘white genes’ that dictate their good conduct.

In other instances, individuals establish mental short-

cuts to bypass logic altogether. Take the example of Salma, a young Spanish woman embedded in a Salafist milieu. She began to question the religious prohibition against eating pork, wondering if it remained relevant given modern hygienic standards. When a spiritual leader told her that ‘God knows better’, she internalised this phrase as a default response.

Crucially, while this specific dietary prohibition is a mainstream religious practice and inherently non-extremist, the cognitive mechanism Salma adopted is highly relevant to P/CVE. By using ‘God knows better’ as a mental shortcut, she effectively closed off all future critical inquiry. In highly dogmatic milieus – where the lines between conservatism, religious fundamentalism, political Islamism, and violent Jihadist sympathies are often blurred – learning to systematically suppress seemingly benign, indirect doubts through such mental shortcuts provides the psychological scaffolding required to sustain much more dangerous, radical attitudes when they are challenged later on.

2) *Changing the relative importance of dissonant cognitions*: To alleviate discomfort, individuals may change their evaluation of a specific dissonant cognition. Salma experienced profound boredom after adapting her life to doctrinal prescriptions and longed to ride a bicycle – an activity prohibited for women within her specific ideological milieu. To resolve the dissonance between her desire and her ideology, she reasoned that the prohibition was ‘cultural’ rather than doctrinal and thus breaking it was merely challenging a human custom and not a divine prescription. She changed the importance ascribed to the dissonant prohibition. This allowed her to ride her bicycle without feeling she was compromising her religious devotion, but also without mounting a serious challenge to her overall attitudes.

3) *Changing the perception of consequences*: A person can reduce dissonance by altering how they view the outcomes of their behaviours. This often overlaps with other strategies, as seen in the earlier example of Salma finding a way to justify cycling. Previously, she believed breaking this taboo carried severe spiritual and social penalties. However, once she reframed the prohibition as a human custom rather than a divine law, she downgraded the consequences to purely socio-cultural ones. Removing the perceived spiritual stakes allowed her to easily dismiss the disapproving ‘looks’ from bystanders without questioning her broader religious commitments. In more extreme cases, when confronted with the severe real-world consequences of their actions – such as causing physical harm to others – radicalised individuals often resolve the resulting discomfort by minimising the damage or convincing them-

selves that the victim 'deserved it'. By reframing negative outcomes as negligible, provoked, ideologically necessary, or even heroic, they neutralise the dissonance that might otherwise prompt them to abandon their violent methods.

4) *Attributing dissonance to a different source*: To protect the core ideology from doubt, individuals may attribute psychological discomfort to their own shortcomings, or to other alternative sources, rather than to an ideological or attitudinal inconsistency. When David was challenged to read a book by Karl Marx, he found that the text did not align with the image of Marx as the 'source of evil' his neo-Nazi literature described. Rather than questioning his ideology, he concluded: 'It must be me. I must be stupid and unworthy'. He salvaged the ideology at the cost of his own self-worth.

5) *Making sacrifices*: As seen in David's decision to abandon a romantic relationship, individuals can resolve dissonance and reaffirm their radical identity by sacrificing personal desires to prove their ideological worth.

In practice, dissonance reduction is complex, and a single rationalisation can span multiple strategies at once. Salma's 'God knows better' mental shortcut is a perfect example: it simultaneously adds a new cognition, diminishes the importance of her specific doubt, and attributes the unanswered question to a different source (to human cognitive limitation rather than to a shortcoming of doctrinal rationality). The five categories outlined above are not mutually exclusive, but an analytical framework to help us recognise these mental gymnastics in action.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Experiences of dissonance can have varying effects. Several characteristics influence their potential to promote attitudinal change:

1) *Relative centrality and magnitude*: The effect relies heavily on how crucial the conflicting beliefs are to the overall ideological framework. Dominik, a Polish far-right nationalist, abandoned his homophobia after a close relative confided they were gay. However, because his homophobia was not the sole pillar of his worldview, he simply reprioritised his activism toward anti-migrant and nationalist activities, remaining firmly embedded in his nationalist group, resulting in only partial deradicalisation.

2) *Persistence across time and context*: An experience of dissonance is easily dismissed if it is isolated. David once mistook disruptive Spanish tourists in Germany for migrants from outside of Europe, and felt intense discomfort after realising his error. Because it was a fleeting moment, he was able to

easily ignore it and returned to his previous habits. With the exception of such rare cases as the above described example of Joanna, sustained dissonance is required for impact.

3) *Threat to self-esteem and identity*: The likelihood of change depends on how severely the dissonance challenges an individual's core identity or self-image. Witnessing sheer hypocrisy within the in-group often strikes at the foundational belief in the group's righteousness. Similarly, confronting the undeniable reality of one's own actions can shatter extremist justifications. For example, Luis, a Peruvian migrant to Poland who had adopted a violently confrontational strategy against racists, viewed his aggression as righteous. However, after witnessing the severe visible trauma of one of his victims, the dissonance between his self-image as a protector and the reality of the harm he caused became too great. He could no longer justify the violence and subsequently abandoned these extreme tactics.

Deradicalisation is seldom the result of a single epiphany, a single experience of dissonance, and *requires internal cumulative build-up as well as favourable external material and social conditions*. Attitudinal change typically stems from a build-up of multiple, sustained experiences of dissonance that slowly overwhelm a person's defensive coping strategies. Experiences of dissonance that initially had no deradicalising effect can still later contribute to such a cumulative effect, as was the case with many of the above described persons who remembered and reinterpreted the dissonant experiences sometimes many years later. Beyond the characteristics of the specific occurrence of dissonance, it is also important for it to occur in a generally favourable context that makes alternatives viable, such as in the above described case of Joanna. Radicalised individuals often have a number of social, psychological or even material dependencies on the extremist group and on their attitudes, which can actively foreclose the choice of alternative paths.

IMPLICATIONS FOR P/CVE PRACTICE

Understanding these characteristics and strategies can allow practitioners to more effectively leverage cognitive dissonance. Any consideration of doing so, however, must be done with rigorous oversight. Deliberately inducing profound dissonance without monitoring the person's coping capacity, and without providing a viable, safe exit route, can cause severe psychological distress. In David's case, the overwhelming accumulation of unresolved dissonance, coupled with his inability to imagine an identity outside of neo-Nazism, ultimately pushed him to the brink of suicide. Interventions must be grounded in evidence

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and carried out with adherence to strict ethical standards by trained professionals. The goal is not merely to break an extremist worldview, but to meticulously construct the conditions under which abandoning that worldview becomes a viable, safe choice.

Only once this supportive scaffolding is in place should P/CVE interventions plan for inducing different kinds of dissonance. When doing so, the above findings suggest that it is important to attempt to induce dissonance that is central to the given ideological framework and poses a challenge to related social identities. To overcome ingrained cognitive habits and ensure that a single occurrence of dissonance is not simply ignored or forgotten, practitioners must actively sustain the dissonant experience, for example by returning to it on multiple occasions and discussing it in relation to different aspects of the client's life. Furthermore, to increase the cumulative effect of distinct doubts or conflicting emotions and attitudes, it could be beneficial to discuss the connections between them.

Crucially, P/CVE practice should not simply 'generate doubt', but also actively identify and inhibit the defensive rationalisation strategies that sustain radical or extremist attitudes. For example, if practitioners anticipate that a client might attribute a contradiction to their own intellectual failure, they can prepare interventions that block that specific route of rationalisation. However, given the highly individualised ways in which people process cognitions and emotions, along with the issue of clients masking their cognitive states and concealing non-compliance, identifying internal dissonance or the strategies of its reduction through behavioural cues is highly complex and might not always be possible. The above-described mechanisms should thus be used to inform practitioner training and reflection, rather than for designing rigid operational protocols. Ultimately, dismantling a radical ideology is only a fraction of the work. When the certainties of extremism are stripped away, practitioners must ensure the individual has a secure, meaningful, and supportive reality to step into.

PRIF SPOTLIGHT: The Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) is the largest institute for peace research in Germany. PRIF sets out to analyze the causes of violent international and internal conflicts, carrying out research into the conditions necessary for peace and working to spread the concept of peace.

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