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Uncertainty and the Roots of Extremism

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Extremism in society is the source of enormous human suffering and represents a significant social problem. In this article, we make a case for the urgency of understanding the psychology of societal extremism, discuss the diverse forms that extremism can take, and identify uncertainty as a correlate of and quite possibly precondition for extremism. We discuss the concept of uncertainty and the burgeoning social psychological research on uncertainty and its links with various forms of extremism. Thus, this article frames and contextualizes the subsequent articles in this issue of the Journal of Social Issues, on the psychology of the relationship, and possible causal link, between uncertainty and societal extremism.

Life is pervaded with uncertainty—ranging from how our interactions with strangers may unfold to the nature of the universe and the meaning of existence. Close relationships can be a source of great uncertainty as they develop, change, and conclude. And at a more macro level immigration, relocation, unemployment, economic crisis, regime collapse, and climate change can all arouse profound and enduring feelings of uncertainty in individuals. Although in some circumstances we seek out uncertainty and find it exhilarating, often we experience feelings of uncertainty as upsetting; something to be confronted and reduced.

In this issue of the Journal of Social Issues we focus on a special, and a highly socially relevant, class of responses to uncertainty—extremism. People may

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zealously cling to all-embracing ideologies and world views, engage in aggressive or disruptive behaviors aimed at protecting or promoting their world view, and identify as true believers with rigidly and hierarchically structured social groups or categories that are ethnocentric and intolerant of dissent and diversity. The psychological relationship between uncertainty and extremism is complex and its nature rests on what is meant by uncertainty, how uncertainty relates to neighboring constructs, what the focus of uncertainty is, what we mean by “extremism,” what aspects of extremism we focus on, and what the psychological processes are that may translate uncertainty into extremism.

It is important to note that “extremism” is a contested term in so far as it is generally used in day-to-day and societal discourse as a term of disparagement. What may be considered and labeled as extremist by some people may be viewed quite differently by others (the classic notion that one person’s terrorist may be another’s freedom fighter). However, extremism that manifests as violence, cruelty, and intentional infliction of human suffering is generally decried even if there is “debate” over the cause and justification of the behavior. It is important to note that societal extremism is a human universal—occurring across history, societies, nations, cultures, and ideologies.

The nine articles in this issue of *Journal of Social Issues* adopt a variety of perspectives and foci to address the nature of and psychological relationship between uncertainty and extremism. They are grouped into three thematic sections: conceptual analyses; culture and migration; ideology, politics, and religion. In addition there is a closing commentary and discussion by Susan Fiske (Fiske, 2013), which pulls the thematic strands together, offers an overview of the intriguing aspects of the uncertainty–extremism interface, and takes the broad view in locating and evaluating the validity, scope, applicability, and policy implications of the science in the context of relevant social issues.

The present contributions were selected from a wider group of papers presented at a small conference on uncertainty and extremism that we (Hogg, Kruglanski, & Van den Bos) organized at Claremont Graduate University in November 2009. The meeting was jointly sponsored by the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues and the European Association of Social Psychology, and received generous support from the School of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences at Claremont Graduate University.

**Uncertainty and Extremism**

Intuitively it often seems that periods of large-scale societal instability and uncertainty coincide with sociopolitical and ideological extremism. Narrative accounts to varying degree substantiate this observation (e.g., Brand, 1995; Goodwin, 2011; Lane, 2011; Midlarsky, 2011; Staub, 1989). The British historian Edward Gibbon, in his momentous work on *The History of the Decline and Fall of the
Roman Empire (published in six volumes between 1776 and 1789), commented on how collapse of the order that Roman rule provided, and the attendant uncertainties that this engendered, lent momentum to a wave of religious fanaticism, and the spawning of a plethora of religious movements that demanded extreme ideological commitment from their adherents.

In the 20th century, the Great Depression of the 1930s witnessed a global rise of national-political extremism, sliding into fascism, communism, and nationalism, and culminating in genocide and a world war that killed between 62 and 78 million people. The postwar nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the West created existential uncertainty due to the possibility of nuclear annihilation (captured by the bleak acronym MAD—mutually assured destruction) and spawned profound anti-Western and anticommunist hysteria, on both sides of the East–West divide. The 1960s and early 1970s, particularly in the United States, saw a period of rapid technological, sociocultural, and normative change that raised uncertainty about America’s future. Coinciding with, and arguably prompted by, these developments the United States was swept by unprecedented race riots and antiwar demonstrations, and many young people were drawn to extreme countercultural movements, religious cults, and radical political organizations that may well be characterized as “extreme.”

Since at least the 1950s substantial demographic changes in the United States and Western Europe have induced uncertainty about what it means to be “White.” This has energized a variety of racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan in the United States, the British National Party in the United Kingdom, the Front Nationale in France, and other similar groups and individuals in Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and other countries. In a similar vein the decline of global Muslim power and influence over the last 200 years, the inability of secular regimes in the Middle East to provide just governance for people in the region, and the confrontation in Muslim nations between traditionalism and Western style modernism has raised in the minds of many value confusion and gnawing uncertainties about the future. Over the past 20 years this has energized in various parts of the world a fundamentalist reaction and associated antifeelings, exemplified by the Taliban, as well as Al Qaeda and its affiliates. This reaction has most recently led to terrorist atrocities in Britain, Spain, the United States, Bali, India, Iraq, Afghanistan, Russia, and other countries, which in turn has created existential uncertainties for many people around the globe. This not only paved the way for zealous opposition to Islam in Europe and for wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also provided fertile ground for people to endorse wide ranging restrictions to civil rights, and a shift to the right in European politics, fueled by anxieties about the influx of Muslim immigrants into the continent.

Most recently, the global financial collapse of 2008 and its attendant economic uncertainties prompted the introduction of draconian economic measures, spawned violent protests in France and Greece, and a reactionary shift of conservative
political ideology in the United States toward radical conservatism. Finally, the wave of uprisings and regime changes across North Africa and the Middle East that erupted in 2011 created sociopolitical uncertainty that has led some current affairs commentators to warn about the specter of extremist organizations filling the void.

Although some forms of extremism (such as behaviors relating to animal rights) may be less strongly associated with feelings of uncertainty and more strongly related to moral principles and sometimes moral rigidity, uncertainty, and extremism often co-occur. But does uncertainty cause extremism, and if so how and under what circumstances? In other words, what is the psychology of the relationship between uncertainty and extremism?

**Social Psychology of Uncertainty**

The idea that uncertainty plays a key motivational role in human behavior is not new (cf. Fromm, 1947). The American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey captured the motivational prominence of uncertainty rather nicely. As he put it: “... in the absence of actual certainty in the midst of a precarious and hazardous world, men cultivate all sorts of things that would give them the feeling of certainty” (Dewey, 1929/2005, p. 33).

However, probably the best known social psychological treatment of uncertainty is provided by social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; see also Suls & Wheeler, 2000). When people feel uncertain about the accuracy of their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes they seek out people who are similar to themselves in order to make comparisons that largely confirm the veracity and appropriateness of their own attitudes. In this way, attitudinal uncertainty is associated with pressures toward uniformity and the development of mutual bonds of attraction among like-minded people that underpin the cohesiveness of social groups (e.g., Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950).

The wider notion here is that when people are uncertain they are more motivated to verify and confirm aspects of themselves, often positive aspects of self, than to obtain accurate information about themselves and their attitudes and perceptions (e.g., Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003). Indeed a core tenet of social cognition is that although people’s attention is attracted by vivid and distinctive stimuli that stand out as different, people are often motivated to confirm their cognitive representations (schemas, stereotypes) about themselves, other people, and their world (see Fiske & Taylor, 2008). In short, uncertainty can motivate a confirmation bias.

Such bias occurs where people possess opinions on a topic (in the form of relevant schemas, stereotypes, and self-perceptions) that are rendered uncertain. In the absence of relevant opinions, however, people whose need for certainty is aroused may be quite susceptible to social influence and be quick to embrace
views, attitudes, or conclusions suggested to them by others (Kruglanski, Webster, & Klem, 1993). People’s susceptibility to social influence under conditions of uncertainty can have profound societal consequences by promoting the impact of certainty-promising demagogues of various kinds, discouraging open-mindedness to a diversity of viewpoints, and enhancing the appeal of rigidly simplistic, black/white ideologies, and fundamentalist belief systems and practices (e.g., Altemeyer, 2003; Baron, Crawley, & Paulina, 2003; Billig, 1982; Curtis & Curtis, 1993; Doty, Peterson, & Winter, 1991; Hoffer, 1951; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Lambert, Burroughs, & Nguyen, 1999; Orehek et al., 2010).

Uncertainty can be considered a demand on the system that calls out for dedication of cognitive resources to resolve the uncertainty. Sometimes people may invest substantial effort in carefully deliberating on and resolving uncertainties—much like people sometimes systematically process persuasive messages (Bohner, Moskowitz, & Chaiken, 1995; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). However, people have limited cognitive processing capacity and they often employ a range of cognitive shortcuts and heuristics (Kahneman & Tversky, 1973; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; also see Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982) to quickly reduce uncertainty until they are “sufficiently” certain about something to desist from dedicating further cognitive effort. This provides closure, in the gestalt sense (Koffka, 1935), and allows people to move on to dedicate cognitive effort to other things (see Kruglanski, Belanger, Chen, & Kopetz, 2012; Kruglanski & Gigerenzer, 2011).

This same principle of parsimoniously reducing uncertainty also extends to the way that groups reduce uncertainty. For example, when groups embrace a variety of different opinions and are uncertain about what the group’s overall position should be they often select an appropriate social decision scheme such as unanimity, majority wins, or two-thirds majority to help them quickly resolve uncertainty (Davis, 1973; Stasser, Kerr, & Davis, 1989). Sometimes groups can be so keen to quickly reach consensus in order to overcome potential disagreement-based uncertainty that they entirely fail to adopt proper rational decision-making procedures—falling prey to groupthink (Janis, 1982; also see Aldag & Fuller, 1993). Finally, certitudes grounded in majority consensus can be so precious that consistent minorities that actively challenge the majority view and ignite uncertainty can be fiercely derogated, suppressed, and excluded—however, once uncertainty raises its head it can be very difficult to brush it aside, and minorities can thus have substantial latent influence over the majority (cf. Moscovici, 1980; see also Hogg, 2010).

People can feel uncertain about many things: for example, their perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, values, relationships, and careers; their future and their place in the world; and even more fundamentally about their very self and identity. The origins of uncertainty can reside in self-reflection, interpersonal relationships, group and intergroup dynamics, or widespread events in the larger society or global community. In addition, the uncertainty can be weak or strong, transitory
or enduring, and important or trivial. Uncertainty is multifaceted and thus how people respond to uncertainty is also multifaceted.

**Extremism as a Resolution of Uncertainty**

In the previous section we have briefly built a case for how badly people can need to reduce feelings of uncertainty. The motivation can be so strong that people take cognitive shortcuts to resolve their uncertainties in ways that are not necessarily optimal. This argument can be taken even further.

Probably the most powerful way to reduce uncertainty and protect oneself from the specter of uncertainty is to ground one’s beliefs, attitudes, values, and understanding of the world in consensus and repeated exposure to similar other people who share and agree with, and reinforce one’s view of the world (e.g., Van den Bos, Poortvliet, Maas, Miedema, & Van den Ham, 2005). People can also insulate themselves from divergent views by effectively living in a world of consensus—for example, consuming only those mass media that share their world view, and navigating largely to fellow-traveler websites on the internet. Following this uncertainty-reducing strategy, people may try to avoid stumbling upon alternative views and when they do they can react strongly by devaluing and discrediting as deviants, heretics, and worse those who think differently. Indeed, there is evidence that dissent and criticism can invite marginalization and rejection, even persecution (e.g., Van den Bos, Euwema, Poortvliet, & Maas, 2007).

People like to feel that their perceptions and understandings of the world are more correct than alternative viewpoints—that there is a clear moral superiority to their own perspectives and thus to themselves and those who share their views. This overlays opinion and interpretation with a stark binary right–wrong classification—it builds a powerful motivation to protect and promote, perhaps at all cost, the ideological integrity and superiority of one’s own views. Authority and leadership can become very important here (e.g., Hogg, 2007a; Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & Degrada, 2006).

People take a lead about what is correct and true from authority figures, who can be contemporary individuals who are strong and directive leaders of a consensus or group that people believe they belong to. There is considerable evidence that where uncertainty is particularly aversive and closure is strongly desired groups prefer strong autocratic leadership where the attainment of consensus is facilitated by reliance on the leader and where consensus-delaying debate and discussion are discouraged (Kruglanski et al., 2005; Kruglanski et al., 2006; Orehek et al., 2010).

Authority can also come from definitive texts that are considered true in an absolute sense—almost all religions and most powerful political ideologies have them. Even scholarly schools of thought can repeatedly refer to a particular body of text as definitive. Those who interpret such texts in an orthodox manner can become highly authoritative and be invested with substantial power as they ground
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the belief system in a solid and unchanging foundation that is highly attractive to those who seek to manage their uncertainty.

Uncertainty is also reduced if people feel that the relations among people are clear, invariant, and predictable. Thus, stable structural relations between groups and among roles and subgroups within a group can be particularly attractive. People can go to great lengths to support and justify the existing social structure, even if such behavior places themselves and their group in a relatively disadvantaged position—an idea explored by system justification theory (e.g., Jost & Hunyadi, 2002; Jost & Van der Toorn, 2011).

Psychological Relationship between Uncertainty and Extremism

Our argument suggests that the human motivation to reduce or to manage uncertainty is strong and is thus associated with extremism, may lay the groundwork for extremism, and may even lead to extremism. This may be so because extremism connotes clarity and a “black and white” perspective, admitting no ambiguous shades of gray. Extremism also embraces the possibility of people sometimes protecting and promoting their uncertainty-reducing black and white world through assertive, radical actions that may be antisocial, disruptive, and aggressive.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in social psychology in researching and theorizing the role of uncertainty and related constructs in a range of behaviors that speak to the general phenomenon of extremism (e.g., Hogg, 2007b; Kruglanski et al., 2006; Van den Bos, 2009; see also Hogg & Blaylock, 2011). The articles in this issue of *Journal of Social Issues* present this wide-ranging research enterprise—they review the current state of knowledge and describe recent conceptual and empirical developments. This is a diverse and vibrant area of research in which, against a background of common purpose, different researchers and research groups offer different perspectives and foci. The articles in this special issue reflect this fruitful heterogeneity.

We have organized the nine main articles into three subsections to reflect the articles’ principal foci. The first four articles (Federico, Hunt, & Fisher, 2013; Hogg & Adelman, 2013; Klein & Kruglanski, 2013; Proulx & Major, 2013) are mainly focused on conceptual issues to do with the nature of uncertainty, the nature of extremism, and the psychological relationship between the two. The next section has two articles (Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013; Gelfand, LaFree, Fahey, & Feinberg, 2013) that focus on uncertainty and extremism in the context of culture, immigration, population migration, and the refugee experience. The final set of three articles (Doosje, Loseman, & Van den Bos, 2013; Kay & Eibach, 2013; McGregor, Prentice, & Nash, 2013) focus on uncertainty and extremism in the context of religious and political zealotry and ideological orthodoxy.

However, these subsections are not insulated from one another—there are common themes, examples, and concepts that thread their way through the
narrative. There is discussion of stereotyping, prejudice, dehumanization, and violence, and the role of status asymmetry and perception of injustice. There is discussion of personal and self-uncertainty and the relationship between uncertainty reduction, pursuit of meaning, gaining control, reacting to threat, and the individual’s need for cognitive closure. In addition to covering diverse aspects of the uncertainty–extremism relation, the articles also draw on a variety of conceptual frameworks and theories, including social identity theory, uncertainty–identity theory, terror management theory, the meaning maintenance model, and concepts of group centrism and compensatory control and conviction.

Extremism, particularly when it is associated with aggression, violence, and destruction, is a grim and ubiquitous social issue; and so all articles offer, in their closing comments, some discussion of and speculation about how to protect society from harmful extremism. The translational and policy implications of the theory and research presented here are given a more complete treatment in Fiske’s (2013) closing summary and commentary.

Postscript

Uncertainty is an inseparable counterpart of historical change and as we enter the second decade of the 21st century the pace of change, driven by ceaseless technological innovations, seems faster than ever before. Arguably then, the challenge of coping with uncertainty and avoiding its potentially dangerous social consequences such as extremism and violence is particularly acute at this historical moment. The social–cognitive study of the interface of uncertainty and extremism is, therefore, of unique poignancy—promising, as it does, evidence-based and theory-grounded scientific insights on a societal problem with wide-ranging and global consequences. We hope that the work described in this special issue constitutes a step toward fulfillment of that promise.

References


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