

## Assessing Threats of Targeted Group Violence: Contributions from Social Psychology‡

Marisa Reddy Pynchon\*  
and Randy Borum†

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**Recent increases in domestic and international acts of extremist violence perpetrated against American citizens have prompted an increased need for information to help understand and evaluate the threat posed to U.S. targets by extremist groups and their individual members. The purpose of this paper is to (i) suggest the potential relevance of social psychological research on group behavior for understanding and assessing threats of extremist group violence; and, (ii) encourage more systematic research on group violence to further inform assessments of group risk. Approaching the issue from the levels of group behavior, and of individual behavior within a group context, the article summarizes research on key principles of group behavior, and the effects of group membership on individual behavior; proposes specific questions derived from these principles for consideration in evaluating risk for violence by groups, and by individuals influenced by groups; and suggests further research needs.**

### INTRODUCTION

On 7 August 1998, two bombs exploded almost simultaneously at the American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. More

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\* Correspondence to: Dr. Marisa Pynchon, Behavioral Research Program, U.S. Secret Service, 950 H Street N.W., Washington, DC 20001, U.S.A.

† Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Duke University Medical Center.

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than 5000 people were injured and 224 were killed as a result of the explosions (Associated Press, 1998). Within three months the U.S. Department of Justice delivered an indictment implicating arab terrorist and financier, Usama bin Laden, who had earlier declared a fatwa, or holy war, against the United States (Vistica & Klaidman, 1998).

The embassy bombings, regrettably, are not isolated instances of recent extremist violence directed against U.S. targets. In the past few years, Americans have been the victims of bombings of the World Trade Center in New York City, the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Centennial Park during the Olympics in Atlanta, and those of numerous women's reproductive health clinics. Some of these incidents of targeted violence have been orchestrated and executed by specific groups, while others have been committed by individuals who acted alone yet were believed to be members of extremist groups or otherwise influenced by extremist ideas (Mullins, 1997).<sup>1</sup> In the case of the Oklahoma City bombing, for example, Timothy McVeigh did not appear to act on behalf of a group; yet, there is speculation that at one time McVeigh was a member of the Michigan Militia (Flesher, 1995) and further speculation that he may have been disavowed by the group for espousing extreme political views and violence (Cohen, 1997). Similarly, Michael Griffin, who shot and killed Dr. David Gunn outside of Gunn's Florida abortion clinic, was reported to have been involved with the right-to-life group Rescue America, although that group denied that he was acting on their behalf (Sverdlik, 1995). Beyond these bombings, extremists in the United States have also begun to experiment with biological and unconventional methods of violence (Baro, 1998). For example, members of the Patriot's Council, an extremist group in Minnesota, were charged with manufacturing ricin—a deadly biological agent—and allegedly discussed plans to use it against federal law enforcement officials (Richter, 1982).<sup>2</sup> In May 1995, Larry Wayne Harris, a suspected white supremacist and former member of the Aryan Nations, was charged with illegally obtaining three vials of bubonic plague from a firm in Maryland (Gorman & Lichtblau, 1998).

This rise in violent activity directed toward U.S. targets poses a significant operational challenge for law enforcement, security, and intelligence agencies who have public safety and security responsibilities for citizens, public officials, and

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of this discussion, our reference to "group violence" focuses exclusively on premeditated, targeted violence that is committed by organized, interacting groups or by individuals who have been influenced by group contact. This focus deliberately excludes mob violence, riots, mass hysteria, and other violence perpetrated by "collectives" of individuals or other non-interacting groups (Milgram & Toch, 1969). Of course, there are also individuals who come to official attention who espouse extremist ideas or who are influenced by extremist ideology, but who have no formal connection to any identifiable group. Such individuals are a legitimate focus of operational concern; however, the extent to which they are affected by group influences is currently not well understood. They may be similar to group members in some ways, but different in others. Likewise, some individuals will simply espouse extremist rhetoric or relate to extremist ideas as justification for committing a horrendous act. Robert Fein and Bryan Vossekuil have referred to these individuals as "Murderers in search of a cause" (R. Fein, personal communication, 13 May 1998). Thus, the present discussion will focus on groups and on members or those with established connections to a group.

<sup>2</sup> Certain groups, particularly some militia groups located within the United States, do not recognize the authority of the federal government or federal law enforcement, or otherwise hold anti-government sentiments. Members of such groups have previously assaulted federal law enforcement officers because of such sentiments.

public facilities.<sup>3</sup> While there may exist opportunities to counter or prevent such incidents, the question of how this can be done is a vexing one. Enhancing protection of U.S. personnel and assets against extremist group violence requires the continuing refinement of a proactive protective intelligence capacity that can facilitate the systematic evaluation of risk posed by extremist groups and their members.

### Assessing Violence Risk

Within law enforcement, security, and intelligence agencies, it is often the responsibility of analysts and investigators to render opinions regarding a group's risk for violence. A substantial literature has emerged within the behavioral sciences guiding the assessment of violence risk posed by *individuals*, in psychiatric and correctional settings (Borum, 1996; Borum, Swartz & Swanson, 1996; Harris & Rice, 1997; Monahan, 1981, 1997; Quinsey, Harris, Rice & Cormier, 1998; Webster, Douglas, Eaves, & Hart, 1997). However, the extent to which this literature and assessment methodology would apply directly to cases involving threats of extremist group violence, or other group violence against U.S. targets, is yet undetermined (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998; Fein, Vossekuil & Holden, 1995). In fact, relatively little attention has been given in any literature to the operational assessment of risk posed by *groups* or by individuals who may be influenced by extremist groups.

To begin to address this lack of operationally relevant research in the area of group violence, we propose that key principles from social psychology may serve as a reasonable starting point, for the information they can provide regarding group behavior and group influence on individual behavior. The primary objective of this paper is to provide those responsible for assessing risk of group violence with fundamental information about group behavior that may be relevant to understanding and evaluating a group's potential risk. For this reason, the discussion will focus predominantly on basic descriptions of key principles of group behavior, and the effects of group membership on individual behavior. Most of the references incorporated within the following discussion are review articles and chapters, and were chosen for their broad overview of a topic area. Readers interested in understanding in greater detail any topics discussed herein are encouraged to refer to these citations as a first step.

A secondary objective of this article is to stimulate greater research into the utility and appropriateness of social psychological concepts for understanding and evaluating risk for group-based and group-inspired violence. Therefore, the following discussion of the principles of group behavior and group influence will include speculation regarding the manner in which these principles may be used to inform assessments of risk, and suggest questions that may assist investigators and analysts in gathering information about a particular group. The approach used here

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the U.S. Secret Service is charged with protecting the President of the United States, the Vice President, and their families; visiting foreign heads of state; former Presidents and their immediate families; the Secretary of the Treasury; and major candidates for, or successors to, the offices of President and Vice President, and their spouses. The State Department provides protection for the Secretary of State and for visiting foreign dignitaries other than heads of state. The U.S. Marshals Service provides protection for the U.S. Supreme Court Justices and for federal judges. Other federal agencies, state and local law enforcement, and private security firms are responsible for protecting numerous other public officials, public figures, and private individuals.

is similar to that used by Goldstein and colleagues (Goldstein, Heller & Sechrest, 1966) in their mining of principles from social psychology to develop hypotheses regarding clinical interventions for behavior change. The following discussion is similarly intended to help develop hypotheses and to stimulate further thought and inquiry regarding the contribution social psychology can make to assessing risk for group violence. Most of the principles and questions presented here have not yet been systematically studied with regard to their association with group violence. Many have not even been studied in the context of other cultures or societies—a relevant consideration for international investigations. For these reasons, we can consider, but offer no definitive answers regarding, the manner in which such information may be related to group risk. Rather, we can only encourage future research to address such questions directly.

### WHY SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY?

The contribution that social psychology stands to make to the assessment of risk posed by groups, and of individuals influenced by groups, comes from the discipline's research on group behavior and on the influences exerted by groups on individual behavior (Gold & Douvan, 1997, chap. 1; Jones, 1985). What research in social psychology has demonstrated, in a variety of situations and paradigms, is that interacting groups often behave in ways that differ markedly from the behavior of individuals. We agree with the assertion that "an understanding of groups is essential to almost every analysis of social behavior" (Levine & Moreland, 1998, p. 415). We further suggest that this same understanding may help investigators and analysts to better examine and understand a group's propensity for violence, either as background information relative to group behavior, or as a specific indicator of increased risk potential. What research in social psychology has also demonstrated is that group membership can affect the behavior of individuals along a variety of behavioral dimensions. To have an understanding of the various pressures and influences that groups can exert on an individual may similarly help investigators and analysts in their assessments of *individuals* who are known or suspected members of an extremist group, aiding in evaluating their risk for certain types of behavior.

The use of social psychology to inform the assessment of violence risk is not new. Findings and concepts from social psychological research have already been used to enhance the evaluation of violence risk posed by individuals. The social psychological concept that behavior results from a dynamic interaction between the person and the environment or situation in which they act (e.g., Jones, 1985; Mischel, 1977; Mischel & Peake, 1982; Ross & Nisbett, 1991) has helped to refine thinking about assessing risk for violence. For example, while earlier efforts focused on attempts to predict violence, current assessments of violence risk incorporate greater appreciation of person–situation interactions and of the dynamic nature of behavior over time (Borum *et al.*, 1996). Social psychology may similarly be helpful in beginning to approach the assessment of risk posed by groups by providing a greater understanding of how groups can behave, and of how pressures and influences of membership in a group may affect individuals functioning within such a context.

## Conceptualization of Group Violence

To date, little attention within social psychology has been given to examining and understanding group violence *per se* (Geen, 1998; for a notable exception, see McCauley & Segal, 1987), particularly that of interactive groups.<sup>4</sup> Existing social psychological research has conceptualized and studied *interactive* group violence within the larger context of general group behavior, rather than as a distinct phenomenon. For this reason, group violence may be better understood as part of a continuum of group behavior that ranges from helping groups, such as charities, to violent groups, such as terrorist organizations or gangs. Certain principles of group dynamics that apply to interactive groups, in general, appear to apply to violent groups as well (e.g., Galanter, 1982; McCauley & Segal, 1987). Although not all principles of group behavior may be relevant to assessing a group's risk for violence, certain principles of group theory and group dynamics may help guide the selection of questions that may be asked for the assessment of groups.

Similarly, individual perpetrators will vary in their degree of group affiliation and group influence. Some may carry out the consensual and organized plan of a group to which they have strong bonds, while others may simply espouse extremist rhetoric as self-justification for horrendous acts of violence. We do not suggest that all of these cases can be understood, assessed or managed in a similar way. Rather, for heuristic purposes, we focus our discussion on the process of how groups may influence the behavior of individuals, and the implications that this influence may have on the likelihood that a person will act violently.

## KEY PRINCIPLES OF GROUP BEHAVIOR

There are many dimensions of group structure and behavior that may be informative for understanding and assessing group risk. The key principles identified here are those that we believe best illustrate the ways in which the behavior of interacting groups can differ markedly from that of individuals. The elements of group behavior selected here as a starting point for understanding group risk are: (i) group attitudes and opinions; (ii) group decision-making; (iii) motivations to group action; and (iv) diffusion of individual responsibility in a group context. The following discussion of these areas describes the manner in which group behavior in each domain differs from individual behavior, and suggests operationally focused questions that may assist in the application of this information to evaluating group risk.

### Group Attitudes

Research has shown that individual opinions and attitudes typically become more extreme (i.e., more radical or more conservative) in a group context, and that

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<sup>4</sup> Greater attention has been paid to examining violence perpetrated by non-interacting groups (i.e. collectives) and on the processes that underlie collective violence.

groups generally hold opinions and attitudes that are more extreme than those held by the individual members of the group (Cialdini, Perry & Cacioppo, 1981; Levine & Moreland, 1988, p. 439; Moscovici, 1985; Myers & Lamm, 1975). This shift in opinions within a group context is referred to in the social psychology literature as “group polarization.” Theories about group polarization focus on two proposed mechanisms: (i) individuals in a group are exposed to previously unheard arguments in favor of a more extreme position and may alter their opinions in response to such newly examined arguments; or, (ii) competition—or social comparison—between group members leads individual members to adopt opinions that are consistent with, yet more extreme than, those held by fellow members; doing so allows them both to be accepted by the group (by holding the same opinion) and to stand out or appear distinctive (by holding a view that is more extreme in its valence) (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Isenberg, 1986). Regardless of the mechanism by which group polarization occurs, research has demonstrated that group discussion of an issue can produce a new group opinion that is in the same direction as, but more extreme than, the opinions held by group members prior to discussion of the issue (see, e.g., Festinger, 1954; Isenberg, 1986). The impact of group polarization on an individual’s attitudes and beliefs may persist even after the individual leaves the group. To the extent that attitudes influence behavior (e.g., Stephan, 1985), it is possible that group behavior that follows from those opinions and attitudes may become more extreme as well (Levine & Moreland, 1998).

### **Group Decision-Making**

In addition to holding more extreme opinions, groups can differ from individuals in the style and outcome of their decision-making. Research on the quality and process of group decision-making has demonstrated that under certain conditions groups may engage in a decision-making style—referred to as “groupthink” (e.g., Janis, 1982)—that fails to identify all aspects of a problem and produces flawed and premature decisions (Esser, 1998; Janis, 1982; ‘t Hart, 1991). Groupthink is characterized by excessive efforts to reach agreement, and a strong need for group consensus that can override the group’s ability to make the most appropriate decision. Symptoms of groupthink include group members’ tendency to (i) believe the group to be more invulnerable than it is; (ii) rationalize the group’s decisions and believe stereotypes about its enemies; and (iii) feel increasing pressure to agree with others in the group (Janis, 1982). The example commonly used to illustrate the phenomenon of groupthink is the flawed decision of President Kennedy and his advisors to authorize the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. The drive for consensus among Kennedy’s advisors is believed to have precluded crucial information from being discussed, and has been blamed for the invasion’s failure.

The conditions most likely to facilitate the occurrence of groupthink include: (a) high group cohesiveness (where the group may reject a member whose opinion deviates); (b) similarity in background and opinions of group members (decreasing the likelihood that alternative viewpoints are represented); (c) directive leadership (where members may feel pressure to agree with the leader rather than voice a dissenting opinion); and (d) stress (where thorough consideration of available

options may give way to urgency) (Janis, 1982). As a result, the decisions reached by groups who operate under conditions that facilitate groupthink tend to be poorer in quality, and less informed by conflicting opinions or “devil’s advocate” positions, than decisions made under more optimal conditions.

## **Group Motivation**

Understanding a group’s motivation to action is particularly relevant to understanding group behavior and risk. Research on social identity theory has shown that groups need to see themselves in a positive light, in much the same way that individuals are motivated to see themselves positively (e.g., Brewer & Kramer, 1985; Tajfel, 1982). In particular, groups need to believe that they are different from—and better than—other groups (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, pp. 165–167). A group’s need to see itself positively can be seen in the attributions members make about others within their group, compared with attributions they make about those not in the group. Group members tend to see the behavior of the group and its members more positively, and believe that the positive behavior is due to factors internal to the group. In contrast, they tend to see others outside the group (including other groups) as having more negative traits and behaviors (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991, pp. 133–135). This group-serving attributional style, often referred to within social psychology as the “in-group/out-group bias” (e.g., Stephan, 1985; pp. 613–616), can lead to stereotyping of members of other groups and dehumanizing or demonizing anyone who is not in the group (e.g., Stephan, 1985).

The in-group/out-group bias can also affect a group’s perceptions of the outside world, external events, and actions of others—particularly if the group is largely isolated and group members must rely on the leader or other members for information and current events. Depending on the group to which an individual belongs, and on the degree of insulation of the group from the outside world, information received about current events may be filtered and distorted (e.g., by a leader or through group discussion) in a manner that meets group needs and motivations. A recent example is the interpretation by some domestic militias that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA treaty) is evidence that the world is moving toward one global world order, an event that many militia members fear would deprive them of their rights and liberties. If group members perceive a threat to the group’s existence, as in the case of the NAFTA treaty, they may be inclined to respond in a manner that protects the group and proves the group’s viability (McCauley & Segal, 1987), a response that may be more extreme behaviorally (e.g., violently) than that which would be expected from any given individual responding to the same threat.

## **Reduced Accountability for Violence**

In certain circumstances, individuals acting under the auspices of a group may feel that their personal accountability for the group’s violent actions is diminished (e.g., McCauley & Segal, 1987). In such situations, individual members may believe the responsibility for a particular act of violence is spread out over the

entire group, and consequently that their own personal level of responsibility is reduced. Therefore, if an individual acts violently within the context of a group activity, the individual may have a diminished sense of personal responsibility and accountability for that violent action. As a result, this diminished responsibility may lower individual thresholds of acceptability for violent behavior (e.g., McCauley & Segal, 1987), facilitating group members' involvement in behaviors and actions that are more violent than those in which they would engage outside of the group context.

## KEY QUESTIONS IN THE ASSESSMENT OF GROUPS

What do these findings have to offer, if anything, to help investigators and analysts answer the central operational question of whether a group is one that merits concern? Although social psychological research has not yet systematically studied group behavior and violence with respect to informing this type of operational decision, we suggest these findings may provide a helpful beginning to considering the types of information that may be relevant to the assessment process and outcome. Ultimately, social science research that addresses directly the issues of group violence will be necessary for developing a scientifically informed approach to evaluating group violence risk.

Based on the literature reviewed above, we suggest that a more systematic understanding of group threat begins with attention to four central questions: (1) what are the norms of the group?; (2) what is the structure of the group?; (3) how cohesive is the group?; and, (4) what is the group's current situation? It is important to note here that the ability to gather information in these four domains will be limited by that which is legal to obtain and that which is available. The availability of certain information may vary according to the specific circumstances of the case, and is likely to be situationally dependent and dynamic over time. The nature of the information and its accessibility may also differ at varying points in the group's developmental history. Thus, these four questions simply serve as a preliminary framework for organizing an inquiry regarding risk.

### What are the Norms of the Group?

One important feature in understanding the nature of a group is to understand its norms—the system of formal and informal rules or standards that govern its operation. Having a sense of such norms and rules may help the investigator to understand the culture of the group, its objectives, and its views on accountability for violence and violence as a means to an end. Knowledge of a group's norms may also help inform an understanding of the group's attitudes (e.g., which attitudes are group members expected to endorse) and group decision-making (e.g., how decisions are usually made, and by whom). It may further provide the parameters of expected conduct and an appraisal of the consequence of deviance from those standards, which could aid in the assessment of conformity. In conducting an investigative inquiry one might consider both *prescriptive* (what members should do) and *proscriptive* (what members should not do) group norms. Suggested



investigative questions for deciphering group norms include: (i) what are the goals of the group?; (ii) what is the ideology of the group?; (iii) what are the mainstream ideas of group members?; (iv) what expectations does the group have of its members?; (v) in what types of activity does the group involve itself?; (vi) what is the nature of the group's communications (public communication/rhetoric and internal communication)?; (vii) what are the consequences of deviance from the group's norms?; and, (viii) does the group view violence as a legitimate means to accomplish goals?

### **What is the Structure of the Group?**

Although norms may be views as part of a group's structure, for heuristic purposes structure here is conceived of as a broader construct describing processes governing internal operation as well as the similarity and insularity of the members. Assessment elements of group structure may assist an investigator to determine the group's risk for group polarization among members' attitudes, as well as the risk for groupthink in the group's decision-making process. Suggested investigative questions that may help to determine the group's structure include: (i) what is the heterogeneity of members' backgrounds?; (ii) how isolated are members from other people outside the group?; (iii) does the group have a systematic procedure for making decisions, and if so, what is that procedure?; and, (iv) does the group have a strong, directive leader?

### **How Cohesive is the Group?**

In assessing risk posed by a group, it may become important to understand the nature and strength of the forces that bind the members together and keep them in the group. Cohesiveness describes the extent to which members have a sense of themselves as a collective—a feeling of “we.” It is driven by positive forces (those that attract members to the group) and negative forces (those that deter members from leaving), that may both be internal (liking/respect/trust for other members) and external (threat from outsiders) to the group. Whereas the positive, internal forces of attraction, safety, and sense of purpose may keep members connected to one another, threat from negative, external forces may also create a similar effect. If a group perceives that they are under attack either ideologically or physically, from an outside entity, the group is likely to band together to protect itself from the threat. In this manner, knowledge of a group's cohesiveness may help inform an understanding of their motivation. Moreover, Janis (1982) noted that group cohesiveness is probably the greatest contributor to the “groupthink” phenomenon, such that highly cohesive groups may be at greater risk for this effect (see also Levine & Moreland, 1998). Suggested investigative questions that may help assess a group's cohesiveness include: (i) what are the benefits that keep members in the group?; (ii) what are the costs to members of leaving or dis-affiliating?; (iii) how concerned are group members about group tasks?; (iv) how concerned are members about the ideology of the group?; (v) how concerned are members about one another?; and, (vi) does the group perceive threats from outsiders?

### What is the Group's Current Situation?

While the first three factors may tend to be more stable over time, particularly for established groups, it is also necessary to assess the situational forces currently impinging upon or stabilizing the group, that may lead to increases or declines in group tension. Recent research on individual risk assessment has noted the importance of including consideration of situational and dynamic variables (Borum *et al.*, 1996; Webster, Harris, Rice, Cormier, & Quinsey, 1994). Similarly, recent research on investigating and evaluating threats suggests that violence may be viewed as the end result of a process, one that includes identifiable factors or events that may precipitate violence (Fein *et al.*, 1995). These same principles should apply to assessing risk posed by groups. Situational changes or evolving events may alter the group's likelihood of a violent response because they can increase the group's sense of urgency. An increased sense of urgency within the group may impact a group's propensity for violence, by (i) increasing the likelihood of an irrational reaction to any subsequent trigger event; (ii) increasing the likelihood of flawed decision-making regarding targeted violence; or, (iii) decreasing the group's ability to see any non-violent alternative as a viable option. It may be, for example, that an unfavorable court ruling or the anniversary of an event would be a sufficient destabilizing factor to raise the index of concern. Suggested investigative questions for understanding a group's current situation include (i) is the group currently under some kind of stress?; (ii) what is the group's current situation, both developmentally and situationally?; (iii) is the group under scrutiny or investigation?; (iv) does the group perceive some sense of urgency?; (v) do they perceive this event to be a turning point with regard to key points in their ideology that something needs to be done, that this is the time to act?; (vi) how well can members calm and support one another?; (vii) are there mechanisms internal to the group to regulate that sort of emotional heightening and forward motion that sometimes causes an extremity shift—are members able to do that for one another and have they done that in the past?; and, (viii) has there been a recent perceived threat or offense to the group or its cause?

### GROUP INFLUENCE ON INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR

As the examples described earlier illustrate, the operational concern about group-related violence is not limited to acts perpetrated as part of an organized or group-sanctioned activity. Indeed, there are many individuals who may be loosely affiliated with a group or movement, or who identify strongly with a group's ideology and who may be motivated to action as a result of such affinity. Social psychological research has demonstrated that membership within a group—or less formal contact with a group—can influence individual behavior along a variety of dimensions. Insofar as current risk assessment research encourages consideration of the interaction between the person and his or her current situation, we suggest that a group to which the individual belongs may similarly be considered a "situation," and one that can strongly impact individual behavior. For this reason, the assessment of risk posed by an individual who is a known or suspected member

of an extremist group should consider the influence that such group membership may have on the individual's behavior and propensity for violence. Research from social psychology suggests that the reasons for such differences in behavior may arise from the pressures, expectations, and obligations, both explicit and implicit, that impact individuals interacting within a group. The three factors to be discussed here are (i) rewards associated with membership; (ii) pressures to conform behavior to group norms; and, (iii) obligations to comply with requests or to obey commands, and the related costs of defiance.

The following discussion will focus primarily on individuals with an established connection to a group, as opposed to those who may merely be influenced by extremist ideas (see footnote 1). However, as we have already discussed, in some circumstances an individual may be repudiated by a group for failing to conform to its norms in their behavior or ideas. The term "fringe of fringe" (R. Fein, personal communication, 13 May 1998) has been used to characterize those persons who may be ostracized by marginal or extremist groups because their individual views or actions are too extreme. Investigators may be concerned about the "fringe of fringe" element and about the nature and degree of risk posed by individuals who may be influenced by extremist groups or their ideas, even if those individuals are not acting as a part of a formal group.

### **Rewards and Costs of Membership**

Why is it that individuals join groups—extremist or otherwise—in the first place? Research on group membership and affiliation indicates that individuals typically join groups because they gain some reward for doing so (Brewer, 1991; Galanter, 1982; McCauley & Segal, 1987; Post, 1986, 1987). The rewards of becoming a group member vary by group, and can include both tangible and intangible benefits. Several benefits, however, appear consistent across most types of group. For example, groups generally provide social acceptance to individual members, and offer a means of social and emotional affiliation with others (e.g., McCauley & Segal, 1987). Gaining the identity of "group member" can be used to augment or substitute for an individual's personal identity, a benefit that may be particularly appealing for those whose own identities have not been socially successful in the past. For such individuals, becoming part of a group may improve their self-esteem and increase the regard they receive from their peers (who may include, or be limited solely to, other group members). An individual who joins a group can take pride in the group's achievements, find meaning in the group's mission, and derive self-esteem from their affiliation with the group and its identity. Some groups, including some underground terrorist groups and cults, may offer their members more tangible benefits such as shelter, clothing, and a structured environment (Galanter, 1982; McCauley & Segal, 1987). The importance of such benefits to an individual inadvertently may create costs for defying the group's will or leaving the group: to do so could mean losing both the intangible and tangible benefits that membership provides. Both the perceived benefits of group membership, and the costs of losing that membership, may thus affect individual compliance with group norms and obedience to group mandates.

## Conformity to Group Norms

Groups tend to function with some implicit and explicit expectations for the conduct and opinions of individual members (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Levine & Moreland, 1998; Moscovici, 1985; Mullen, 1983). These expectations are often referred to as group “norms.” Norms provide some structure for individual attitudes, behavior, and interaction, and typically result in a certain degree of uniformity or order within the group. Groups vary in the particular content of their norms, as well as in the extent to which individual conformity with those norms is required. In this regard, individual conformity with group norms can be seen in the extent to which the attitudes, opinions, and behaviors that were typical of the individual prior to joining the group change to become more typical of those of the group (e.g., Cooper & Hazelrigg, 1988; Moscovici, 1985).

Some particular factors that increase the likelihood of conformity with group norms include high cohesiveness of the group, isolation of the group, and high costs of defiance (see, e.g., Asch, 1955; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; McCauley & Segal, 1987; Moscovici, 1985). Social psychological research also suggests that the extent to which individuals depend on the group for satisfying their needs—whether emotional, physical, or psychological—determines the likelihood of their conformity to the group. Similarly, as the costs, or perceived costs, of defying or deviating from the group increase, conformity will likely increase. In light of the many rewards an individual may gain from group membership, conformity may be seen as a small price to pay for the benefits of membership.

## Compliance and Obedience

With respect to compliance with group requests and obedience to group commands, social psychological research suggests that the pressures that affect compliance or obedience are similar to those that influence conformity with group norms. Thus, group cohesion, isolation, dependence, and the costs of defiance appear to increase compliance and obedience (e.g., Asch, 1955; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Moscovici, 1985). A key difference between compliance and conformity is that compliance occurs in response to an explicit request or order, whereas conformity occurs in response to more implicit pressures from group norms. With compliance, the specific nature of the request or command is quite clear and requires little interpretation. Similarly, the costs or punishment for failing to comply may be made more explicit as well.

As a powerful example of obedience, Stanley Milgram’s experiment (Milgram, 1963)—where subjects were told to shock others whom they believed to be fellow subjects—demonstrated the willingness of individuals to obey commands from an authority figure, even when they believed their obedience resulted in harming an innocent person. This finding underscores the extent to which an individual member may be willing to obey commands from a group’s leader, even when the command goes against what the individual believes to be right. In such circumstances, if other group members are also complying (e.g., Asch, 1955), the pressure to obey may become even more substantial.

## **A Note on Defiance**

What about those who defy the norms or orders of the group? From the perspective of risk assessment, concern may be generated by individual members of a group who split off into their own faction due to ideological disputes with the rest of the group or dissatisfaction that the group is not “going far enough” in pursuit of its cause (McCauley & Segal, 1987). Those who deviate from the main group may in turn influence other group members, a process referred to in the research literature as “minority influence” (e.g., Maass & Clark, 1984). Research findings on minority influence and defiance have shown that often what enables an individual to defy the group’s will or objective is the presence of just one other dissenter (e.g., Asch, 1955; Maass & Clark, 1984; Moscovici, 1985), even if the dissenter does not agree with the defying member. As long as there is at least one other person in the group who disagrees with the group consensus, it becomes easier for the individual to defy or leave the group.

## **KEY QUESTIONS FOR ASSESSING INDIVIDUALS INFLUENCED BY GROUPS**

Applying these principles from social psychology relative to group effects on individuals, we propose three fundamental questions for investigations involving individuals influenced by groups: (1) how important is the group to the individual?; (2) how likely is the individual to deviate from the group?; and, (3) how likely is the individual to move toward a violent or extreme solution? As with the questions suggested for evaluating a group’s risk for violence, these questions are derived only from existing theory and research and are intended as a starting point for considering how to incorporate such information into an assessment of an individual’s risk for violence. Definitive implications of the answers for estimating risk are not currently available in the empirical literature.

### **How Important is the Group to the Individual?**

The extent to which an individual may act in accordance with the ideology of the group is likely related to the degree of importance that he or she attaches to the group (e.g., Moscovici, 1985). Although a member may be committed to a cause or an idea that the group supports, the key distinguishing factor appears to be their commitment to the group *per se*. While some people find a cause that supports their values, predispositions, or intentions, others attach to a cause as a means to define themselves. In this light, the structure and organized rhetoric of some groups may become extremely attractive. These individuals can define themselves by the group; it becomes central to their identity. If an individual defines him- or herself by group membership, then the influence of that group is likely to be a powerful catalyst or restraining factor. Similarly, the more central the group is in the individual’s social network, particularly with an insular group, the more likely the individual is to conform, or at least to comply or obey. The

likelihood of group conformity will also be related to fears or consequences of disapproval. Potential investigative questions that may assist in gauging the importance of the group to the individual include: (i) how important is group membership to the individual's identity?; (ii) to what extent does the individual have contact with persons outside the group?; (iii) how would the individual perceive disapproval from the group?; (iv) how long has the individual been affiliated with the group?; and, (v) does the individual participate in activities that are related to the group?

### **How Likely is the Individual to Deviate from the Group?**

Deviation from, or defiance of, group norms may be either a risk factor (one that increases the likelihood of violence) or a protective factor (one that decreases the likelihood of violence), depending on the case. If the individual has ideas that are less extreme than those held by the group, or if the individual is less inclined to use violence, then a high propensity for group deviance would likely mitigate the person's risk. Conversely, for those on the extreme fringe of the group, high propensity for deviation could increase the individual's risk for violence, even for an individual affiliated with a group that does not endorse violent acts. As noted above, existing research suggests that if there is another dissenter in the group, even if they do not agree with the first dissenter, there is an increased likelihood that the first dissenter will be able to carry through with their dissent. Thus, increases in dissenting ideas within the group may facilitate defiant actions. Similarly, it is critical to assess the extent of a dissenter's influence over other members. If they are able to recruit other dissenters, the likelihood of deviant action will increase. Potential investigative questions for assessing the likelihood that the individual will deviate from the group include: (i) does the individual have ideas that are dissonant from the group?; (ii) if so, are those ideas more or less extreme/violent than those of the group?; (iii) has the individual ever expressed, to the group or to other members of the group, some dissenting or deviating idea?; (iv) if so, what happened as a result of that deviation?; (v) is there another member who openly disagrees with the group?; and, (vi) is the individual capable of exerting influence on other members?

### **How Likely is the Individual to Move toward a Violent or Extreme Solution?**

The assessment of this question requires inquiry into the individual's views on violence and into the existence of group-related contextual factors that may permit or facilitate violence. For example, personal anonymity and dehumanization of the intended victims facilitate actions by inhibiting the social and emotional factors that would typically suppress an aggressive response. Examining the scope of the individual's violent direction—in combination with an assessment of the individual's intent and capacity—may lead the investigator toward an informed appraisal of an individual's movement toward or away from violence as a solution or as a means

to an objective. Here too it may be informative to gauge whether the individual may feel reduced accountability for their violent actions if they believe they are acting in the name of a group or its cause. Potential investigative questions for evaluating the likelihood that the individual may move toward a violent or extreme solution include: (i) does the person have distorted perceptions (e.g., stereotypes and prejudices) or non-group members?; (ii) is there a tendency to dehumanize non-group members?; (iii) are there cues that diminish the individual's sense of accountability (e.g., anonymity) or self-awareness (e.g., emotionally charged ceremony)?; (iv) does the individual support violence as a legitimate means to accomplish an objective?; and, (v) would the individual violate group norms towards more deviant behavior?

## CONCLUSIONS

As events over recent years have shown, extremist violence is no longer something that only occurs outside the United States. Increasingly, Americans are among those targeted for such acts of violence. Thus, there is a continuing need for developing capabilities to systematically and effectively evaluate the risk of targeted group violence. Social psychologists stand to make a significant contribution to this endeavor; but to do so, they will have to embark upon research that is more operationally focused than that which we have discussed here. We emphasize that the few social psychological principles and findings covered here are by no means the only topics in social psychology that may shed light on efforts to evaluate group risk. Rather, we hope that our brief elucidation of these topics and their potential applicability to risk assessment will be used as a stepping stone to further critical thought and inquiry into evaluating group-related violence risk.

This topic area is one that is broad enough to support numerous research inquiries, and is complex enough to necessitate a multidisciplinary approach to the issue. As a starting point, the questions suggested here as potentially useful for investigators and analysts could be explored by researchers—for their utility to understanding aspects of a group's behavior discussed here, as well as for their relationship, if any, to violent acts by the group or its members. In addition, considerable behavioral science research has already been conducted relative to the assessment of violence risk within individuals in psychiatric and correctional settings (e.g., Borum, 1996; Borum *et al.*, 1996; Harris & Rice, 1997; Monahan, 1981, 1997; Quinsey *et al.*, 1998; Webster *et al.*, 1997). The factors identified in this research, the assessment approaches discussed, and the methodologies used all merit exploration for their potential applicability to assessing risk for group violence. Finally, solutions to the problem of evaluating risk for targeted group violence may best be approached through the combined research efforts of multiple relevant fields, a task that will require greater interdisciplinary communication regarding research findings. Considering the application of social psychology to the problem of risk assessment is only one step in the process.

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