



Published in final edited form as:

*J Soc Issues*. 2013 September 1; 69(3): 605–613. doi:10.1111/josi.12031.

## A Millennial Challenge: Extremism in Uncertain Times

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### Abstract

This comment highlights the relevance and importance of the uncertainty-extremism topic, both scientifically and societally, identifies common themes, locates this work in a wider scientific and social context, describes what we now know and what we still do not, acknowledges some limitations, foreshadowing future directions, and discusses some potential policy relevance. Common themes emerge around the importance of social justice as sound anti-extremism policy.

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*Uncertainty and Extremism*, this *Journal of Social Issues* volume, is a disturbing, must-read compilation of millennial, unprecedented insights. Addressing a life-and-death mystery of our era, the tragedy of terrorism nevertheless yields to scientific analysis. We can understand why desperate people blow up thousands of their fellow human beings.

This concluding article has several aims: highlighting the relevance and importance of the topic both scientifically and societally, identifying common themes, locating this work in a wider scientific and social context, identifying what we now know and what we still don't, acknowledging some limitations, foreshadowing future directions, and discussing some potential policy issues.

### Relevance to Science and Society

Scientific understandings can and must inform societal policies, if humans are to survive each other's violence. Make no mistake: Understanding is not condoning. As someone who sought to understand why ordinary people torture enemy prisoners (Fiske, Harris, & Cuddy, 2004), I learned the hard way that the public assumes that the understanding excuses the doing. In a painful BBC interview, victims of torture accused us of collusion: by explaining the circumstances that could drive almost anyone to commit immoral heinous acts, we were letting them off the hook. I tried unsuccessfully to argue that understanding the circumstances motivating extreme behavior extends the blame—beyond the actors who allow themselves to be manipulated by dire situations—to those who control the situations, in the case of torturers, their supervisors and policymakers. In the case of terrorists, this would be their leaders and the host country policies that worsen their situation. More on that later.

Social science is particularly vulnerable to this understanding=excusing view because we explain how situations cause behavior, even extreme behavior. Observers prefer to blame other humans for horrible outcomes, the more horrible, the more human responsibility must be blamed (belief in a just world: Lerner & Miller, 1978; defensive attributions: Shaver, 1970; retributive justice: Darley & Pittman, 2003; moral psychology: Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Knobe et al., 2012). If someone, even a bad actor, is responsible, then presumably someone is in control and future malfeasance can be prevented. Circumstances seem too random to be controlled, so social context is a dissatisfying explanation, especially for the most hideous events.

This speaks precisely the point of the current work, as well as other social issues analyses that offer context to explain our shared problems. We can change contexts more effectively than merely by restraining bad actors, simply incarcerating or executing a few evil-doers. As long as the wrong contexts prevail, other bad actors will rise up to take their places. For society, citizens and policymakers need to get the message that explanations by circumstances do not excuse, but call for changing those toxic circumstances.

For scientists, this means that as we seek to understand what drives extreme behavior, we must explain the societal implications of our contextual explanations, as the final section of this comment—and many of the authors—try to do. First, however, consider what the authors tell us about how contextual uncertainty drives extremism.

## Identifying Common Themes

*Social justice* appears key, defining social justice as equality, voice, respect for individuals, and respect for all groups. Violations of social justice sow the seeds of uncertainty and extremism. According to Gelfand, LaFree, Fahey, and Feinberg (2013), terrorism is more likely in cultures that are fatalistic (low personal control), tight (less tolerance, more humiliation, less access, no gradual change), and rigid in gender roles valuing masculinity (high aggression). Social justice has a short reach in a tight society that does not tolerate deviance or change, and fatalism reflects outgroups having no hope. To reduce extremism, give certainty about social justice in terms of democratic representation, and individual personal agency. (Gender equality is more complex, a point we will revisit.)

Among the most important candidates for social justice are immigrants, especially those who are in the host country a minority ethnicity, religion, or nationality. Esses, Medianu, and Lawson (2013) show how easily civilized societies such as Canada can dehumanize immigrants as animals (infectious, amoral, and violent), lacking human sensibility. Our American data support the Esses et al. interpretation: Immigrants land in the stereotypically least warm, least competent cluster of societal groups, along with dehumanizing homeless people (Lee & Fiske, 2006). Dehumanizing immigrants (or anyone else) is opposite of the most useful policy because it reinforces their humiliation. Esses et al.'s link to social dominance orientation shows how dehumanizing immigrants solidifies the status quo.

Social injustice is not lost on its targets. As Doosje, Loseman, and van den Bos (2013) note, when society's outgroups perceive social injustice, combined with threat to their own group, and resulting uncertainty, this creates a toxic set of beliefs: authorities are illegitimate, the ingroup is morally superior to them, mainstream society and its members seem distant, and voluntary isolation results. Doosje et al. show that this toxic context radicalizes immigrant youth.

Immigrant young men are especially under threat by social injustice, as they suffer disproportionately high unemployment and ill-defined futures, being of an age when time horizons are short and a gender for whom agency and aggression are expected. This makes certainty all the more appealing. Especially attractive are particular ideologies that promise personal control or societal control over seemingly random misfortunes, as Kay and Eibach (2013) show. Functionally relevant ideologies will particularly appeal if they counteract feelings of arbitrary victimization.

Not just relevant, control-enhancing ideologies, but extreme ones intrinsically promise the most relief from uncertainty and perceived social injustice. McGregor, Prentice, and Nash (2013) propose that attraction to extremes stems from a motivational state termed reactive approach. That is, personal motivational conflict results from frustration of one's active goals (e.g., accomplishment) through salient threat (e.g., disruption). Frustration's resulting

uncertainty and anxiety are aversive, creating vigilance and inhibition. But relief lies in the behavioral approach system, which down-regulates the vigilance and anxiety. Approaching extremes is rewarding because they provide clear action plans to counter the fallout from goal obstruction. Righteous anger plays a role here. But respect for one's values averts this process: social justice again.

Attraction to extremes may well be an implicit, unconscious process, as Proulx and Major (2013) suggest. Faced with even trivial anomalies that violate accustomed meanings, people express more extreme commitment to ideologies they already endorse. Perhaps being embedded in what seems a socially just, certain context would mitigate the need for an extreme ideology commitment.

Particular goals also promise certainty and efficacy. As Klein and Kruglanski (2013) demonstrate, actions that uniquely serve only one goal, despite costs to other goals, seem especially instrumental to that goal. Extremism exemplifies goal commitment despite the costs of deviance within larger society. Loyalty and commitment to larger society might mitigate these reactions; we will come back to this point. For now, the foundational point remains that seeking epistemic certainty motivates extremism.

Particular groups likewise create certainty, Hogg and Adelman (2013) show. Groups that are entitative (groupy), structured, action-oriented, autocratic—and thus extreme—offer more appealing identities under uncertainty. This crucial idea explains how an uncertain identity seeks a clear, well-defined action plan. Again, an alternative identification with the mainstream society would counteract the appeal of fringe extremist groups.

If we must go beyond the potential extremists as individual bad actors to their toxic circumstances, this demands knowing: Who is responsible for creating conditions conducive to uncertainty and extremism? Violators of minorities' social justice are also themselves likely to be extremists, most likely high-status groups oriented toward clarity and conviction, that is, those with a need for closure. Federico, Hunt, and Fisher (2013) show that high status exaggerates need for closure effects on outgroup derogation. This explains both states' and ruling classes' extremism, as in dictatorships, but also the most likely perpetrators of social injustice.

In short, social injustice appears as a common element producing uncertainty and fueling attraction to extreme ideologies, goals, and groups that seem to promise certainty, dignity, voice, and traction on frustrated hopes. The uncertainty-extremism connection ranks as a millennial insight, not because humans have never faced terrorism before, but because the current technology makes terrorism an all-the-more deadly global threat, and because the problem now belongs to all of us. Answers as comprehensive as this one are a service to humanity.

## Locating within the Wider Scientific and Social Context

Some broader social scientific and historical perspective helps place these social psychological findings. Turning to history, societal uncertainty has encouraged populist movements on both extremes in the past (Fiske, 2011). Given inequality and instability, discontent and uncertainty sow the seeds for groups claiming to represent “the people” against the elites. Representing the people as uncertain and out of control lays the ground for providing certainty and control through an ideological movement that promises revenge against those with more control.

Inequality not only deprives subordinate groups of control, but it also undermines societal unity. Inequality, as one form of social injustice, ruins societies: increasing violence,

damaging health, and undermining communities (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Lack of control includes an inability to predict what will happen (uncertainty), as well as an inability to affect one's fate (influence). Of course, utterly predictable inequality could eliminate uncertainty if the powerholders oppress the subordinates in utterly predictable ways, but the lesson from this special issue is that unpredictability will make matters worse.

## Identifying What We Now Know and What We Still Don't

To be sure, the answers offered here provide only one piece of the complex puzzle. As the editors Hogg, Kruglanski, and van den Bos (2013) note, not all uncertainty leads to extremism, and not all extremism is "determined" by uncertainty. For example, uncertainty can redouble people's efforts but it can eventually induce passivity, depending on the amount and duration of randomness. And extremism can stem from uncertainty but also from reasoned political discourse: Principled extremism may be complex and sophisticated, from having to defend itself intellectually (Sidanius, 1984). Interest and information search can correlate with extreme positions, in some contexts. We do not know what happens when.

We know that affirming one's values can undercut attraction to extremes in the face of uncertainty (McGregor et al., 2013). But how does a society tolerate, even encourage, the expression of minority values antithetical to its mainstream values? In the U.S., freedom of speech protects most value expression, even hate speech. Europe has mostly decided against allowing hateful speech, but in practice this mostly applies to minorities hating the majority, upward hate, not the other direction, downward hate. From a scientific perspective, we do not know the impact of minority hate speech, though we can guess. The point is that the expression of views distasteful to the majority may benefit the minority, but it also has costs to their public image (divisiveness, prejudice) and possibly to their action intentions (fomenting disruption); we need to know more about all this. How do we assure value affirmation when values are counter to host values?

A particular place of value conflict lies in some minority groups' attitudes toward women. For example, immigrant cultures that endorse rigid patriarchy do not fit well with developed nations' gender equality. Gelfand et al. (2013) note that rigid gender roles and masculine culture encourage terrorism. The obvious answer might seem to be empowering women, but how does a society change gender inequality without threatening the very men most at risk for extreme reactions? Male threat based on changing gender roles constitutes part of the uncertainty that plagues many vulnerable but proud immigrant groups. We need to know more about how to do this. How do we empower women without threatening patriarchal men?

We know that social and societal distance contribute to extremism (Doosje et al., 2013). Costs of deviance to the larger society are minimized (Klein & Kruglanski, 2013). How do we create links and loyalty to larger host societies? We know that immigrant youth who fare the best have dual identities, integrating both origins and host as ingroups (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). But how do we offer them opportunities to show that both identities are legitimate and not zero-sum?

If we create opportunities to move up in the larger world, how do we prevent forming elites with high need for closure and outgroup derogation (Federico et al., 2013)? Giving power to the formerly powerless make create dictatorial monsters unaccustomed to tolerance, compromise, and moderation necessary to govern modern developed societies. Pluralism does not come spontaneously, yet our globalized societies require all of us to tolerate the uncertainties it creates.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Collectively and individually, this volume is a tour-de-force. Across the contributions, this volume provides the ideal combination of laboratory experiments' causality and real-world correlations' generalizability. Within a given contribution, the ideal combination remains of course hard to create. Future efforts will doubtless strive to use such converging operations to triangulate on combined internal and external validity.

An impressive array of applicable theory appears here. As noted, uncertainty-extremity insights might profit from some additional perspectives. For example, as noted, the context hypothesis for sophisticated extremists posits that the position of having to defend an unpopular position correlates with political interest and information (Sidanius, 1984), belying the idea that extremism necessarily reflects uncertainty. Likewise, the attitude polarization approach posits that more thought leads to more extremism, as long as information can fit into a well-developed framework (Tesser, 1978). As a counterpoint, perhaps the complexity-extremity theory also has a role here (Linville, 1982), contributing the idea that simplicity (few dimensions) about an outgroup, here the dominant culture, allows extremism. Understanding how all these prior theories play off might help explaining uncertainty and extremism.

Attitude strength and certainty approaches might also generate some traction here (Tormala & Rucker, 2007). Many of the papers imply that extremism links to attitude strength, conviction, and commitment to action. Attitude certainty may instead amplify the attitude in whatever direction it tended, strengthening univalent attitudes but weakening ambivalent attitudes' resistance to persuasion (Clarkson, Tormala, & Rucker, 2008). Even uncertain attitudes might also foster extremism because they can motivate selective exposure to confirmatory information in times of doubt (Sawicki, Wegener, Clark, Fabrigar, Smith, & Bengal, 2011). Future work might profitably connect to the attitude strength literature.

Ambivalent attitudes have another role to play in uncertainty and extremism. The dynamics of disenfranchised groups' envy upward creates a volatile mix of perceptions. The dominant groups' higher status makes them seem to possess some enviable competences (but not morality and trustworthiness), creating a mix of grudging respect and resentment (Fiske, 2011; Fiske et al., 2007). Although passive associations may prevail in stable times, in uncertain times, the envious attack the envied. Uncertainty combined with this volatile form of ambivalence is dangerous for society, but we do not know enough about ambivalence, uncertainty, and extremism toward envied outgroups.

None of the papers come from anyone personally committed to extremism, to the best of my knowledge. While it might seem heretic, the science might benefit from understanding any principled perspectives that attempt to defend extremism on its own terms. The editors justly note that extremism is contested but inflicting violence is decried. Nevertheless, an extremist partisan might detect a status-quo bias in terms such as "cling to ...rigid, intolerant ... " versus their own self-view of coming to firm convictions, respecting authority, and being loyal to their oppressed group. Cited briefly, fusion theory might provide some leverage here (Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012). When personal identity fuses with group identity, maintaining individual autonomy and agency in the service of group goals, people are capable of extraordinary self-sacrifice in the service of the collective. Whether describing a fused extremist as a terrorist or a freedom fighter or a national hero, the processes of identity fusion can be useful here.

Finally, we have not begun to understand the micro-level processes involved. Perhaps this level of analysis is premature or irrelevant, but if the uncertainty-extremity process seems right—and it does—then it must be basic enough that it even has neural correlates (Fiske &

Taylor, 2013). For example, activation of the brain's reward areas to an envied outgroup's misfortunes (even without ingroup gain) correlates with self-reports of having personally harmed the envied outgroup (Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011). Perhaps we are wired for uncertainty to abet extreme actions toward superordinate groups.

## Found in Translation: Policy Issues and Strategies

Here's a radical policy implication: Domestic social justice and stable equality create certainty and moderation. Social welfare and value expression promote certainty and allow dialogue among reasonable groups. Creating social justice is not easy because uncertainty also stems from crises, conflicts, and disasters. But the inevitability of these disruptions, if not their timing, suggests preparing society for them via rich, complex, and interconnected social networks of mutual respect, even or especially in the face of profound disagreement. Socially just domestic policy may be the best anti-terrorism and foreign policy.

## Biography

Susan T. Fiske—Eugene Higgins Professor of Psychology and Professor of Psychology and Public Affairs, Princeton University (Ph.D., Harvard University; honorary doctorates, Université Catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium; Universiteit Leiden, Netherlands)—investigates social cognition at cultural, intergroup, interpersonal, and neural levels. Policy applications include the U.S. Supreme Court citing her gender-bias testimony, presenting to President Clinton's Race Initiative Advisory Board, editing *Beyond Common Sense: Psychological Science in the Courtroom*, and authoring the Guggenheim- and Russell-Sage-funded *Envy Up, Scorn Down: How Status Divides Us*. Upper-level texts are *Social Beings: Core Motives in Social Psychology and Social Cognition: From Brains to Culture*.

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