UNPACKING THE LINKS BETWEEN IDEAS AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

PETE SIMI

August 2020

About the Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public.

About the Author

Pete Simi is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at Chapman University. He has studied extremist groups and violence for more than 20 years, conducting interviews and observation with a range of violent gangs and political extremists.

Dr. Simi is a member of the NCITE at the University of Nebraska, Omaha which is the newest university-based research center funded by the Department of Homeland Security and committed to the scientific study of the causes and consequences of terrorism in the United States and around the world. His research has been funded by the National Institute of Justice, National Science Foundation, Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, Department of Homeland Security, and Department of Defense. Simi is also co-author of an award-winning book manuscript, American Swastika: Inside the White Power Movement's Hidden Spaces of Hate and frequently serves as an expert legal consultant on criminal cases related to political extremism.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.

Introduction

A hypothetical "lone gunman" walks into a reproductive health care clinic spraying bullets from his assault rifle screaming that "abortion is murder!" and "the Army of God seeks revenge for the unborn fetuses murdered every year!" The shooting rampage leaves three individuals dead and 11 others injured. Additional weapons and explosives are discovered in the shooter's van parked outside the clinic. Inside the van, a slew of literature explains how abortion is part of a liberal, feminist initiative to "enslave white Americans." During the shooter's interview with law enforcement later that day, he explains his motive was to "intimidate the general public by enforcing God's law while sending a message to any other abortion killers that they might want to find another line of work." In the days following the attack, scattered media coverage describes the gunman as "deranged," "crazed," and "unstable." Few, if any, note the clear political and religious motivation nor do any of the articles describe the incident as "terrorism" or the shooter as a "terrorist."

What should we conclude about this scenario? The fact that the shooter was driven by ideological concerns seems obvious, yet the response suggests the link is apparently not so obvious. Understanding the relationship between ideas and violence presents several substantial challenges. These challenges are magnified given our tendency toward employing a highly inconsistent assessment of when and how ideas influence violence. We tend to perceive a close connection between ideas and violence when the incident involves a Muslim perpetrator, while relying on a far different metric when the perpetrator is not Muslim.[1] And the consequences are tremendous with major differences in terms of public perceptions and legal treatment.

For more than 20 years, I've been trying to understand how relatively organized sets of beliefs (i.e., ideology) influence violence. We sometimes refer to violent acts motivated by political or religious ideology as "terrorism" or more recently "violent extremism." Yet, as various observers point out,[2] political or religious ideas are not uniformly held among actors who commit this type of violence. Even more complicated, some actors involved in this type of violence are not ideological adherents themselves but rather motivated by a host of other possible factors (e.g., personal revenge, profit, status etc.).

During the past two decades, much of our research has focused on right-wing extremist violence and the cultural dimensions that give rise to and help sustain the personal and

[1] Erin Kearns, Allison Betus and Anthony Lemieux, "Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?" *Justice Quarterly* 36, no. 6 (2019): 985-1022.

[2] Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and to Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

collective identities at the core of any extremist movement. Right-wing extremism is fascinating, in part, because this type of violence has been overlooked and ignored despite an extensive history in the US and Europe. Of course, there have been important exceptions, but few would argue there is a substantial imbalance in the amount of attention and resources devoted to right-wing extremism as compared to Islamic extremism. In the wake of Charlottesville, the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, and the New Zealand mosque attacks, however, the neglect of right-wing extremism has begun to change. Unfortunately, much of the recent attention suggests a degree of "newness" that is misleading and distorts the nature and long-term persistence of this problem both at home and abroad. Because of the longstanding invisibility, this essay explores the broader relationship between ideas and violence using the case of US right-wing extremism as a point of focus.

Our research has involved sitting on death row talking with individuals convicted of white supremacist and anti-government violence about their life histories and extremist beliefs, spending long hours attending group meetings and other gatherings like neo-Nazi music festivals, and living with families committed to raising the next generation of right-wing extremists.[3] We have also conducted intensive semi-structured life history interviews with over 100 former white supremacists gathering in-depth information regarding their childhood, adolescence, and adult lives. These interviews provide detailed portraits of pathways into and out of extremism as well as the character of their involvement including whether the person directly participated in violence and, if so, the nature of that violence.[4]

Conceptual Background

On the one hand, all human action including violence cannot occur without ideas. Ideas influence action both consciously and unconsciously. But, beyond this truism, the water quickly muddies. In fact, the understanding that clearly formulated ideas embedded as internalized cultural values serve as the basis for motivating individual and group behavior is at odds with a growing body of research in both cultural sociology and the neurosciences.[5] Recent (and not so recent) frameworks suggest the formulation of ideas

[3] Pete Simi and Robert Futrell, *American Swastika: Inside the White Power's Movement Hidden Spaces of Hate (Violence Prevention and Policy)* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010).

[4] Kathleen Blee, Matthew DeMichele, Pete Simi, Mehr Latif, "How Racial Violence is Provoked and Channeled," *Socio*, no. 9 (2017): 257-276; Pete Simi, Kathleen Blee, Matthew DeMichele and Steven Windisch, "Addicted to Hate: Identity Residual Among Former White Supremacists," *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 6 (2017): 1167-1187; Pete Simi, Karyn Sporer and Bryan Bubolz, "Narratives of Childhood Adversity and Adolescent Misconduct as Precursors to Violent Extremism: A Life-Course Criminological Approach," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 53, no. 4 (2016): 1-28.

[5] Omar Lizardo, "How Cultural Tastes Shape Personal Networks," *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 5 (2006):

is often post-hoc following behavior. That is rather than a clear-cut set of ideas preceding and informing behavior, action may first occur followed by an individual or group developing a more detailed explanation "after-the-fact" as part of a sense making process. Often referred to as "vocabularies of motive"[6] or more simply "accounts",[7] these formulations provide a rationale for why someone did what they did which, in turn, can clearly influence future behavior.[8]

Social psychologists have long reminded us there is a fundamental disjuncture between what people believe and what people do.[9] People often say one thing and do something quite different. More recently, terrorism scholars have emphasized this point to raise caution about assuming a straightforward relationship exists between beliefs and violence.[10] For example, a growing number of studies point to a variety of "non-ideological factors" that are also important to understanding involvement in extremist violence.[11] We would be remiss, however, if these studies were used to dismiss the importance of ideas as it relates to violent extremism. Clearly, the lesson is that while ideas are not the only factor, they play an important role. This is quite different than the recent fad among some observers who claim that "violent extremism is not about ideology."

Moreover, at times, terrorism scholars have tended to rely on a narrow conception of ideas focusing more on the role of extremist groups in terms of producing and distributing propaganda, recruitment techniques and the role of group dynamics in helping radicalize

778-807; Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Stephen Vaisey, "Motivation and Justification: A Dual-Process Model of Culture in Action," *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 6 (2009): 1675-1715; Karen Cerulo, "Continuing the Story: Maximizing the Intersections of Cognitive Science and Sociology," *Sociological Forum* 29, no. 4 (2014):1012-19.

[6] C. Wright Mills, "Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive," *American Sociological Review* 5, no. 6 (1940): 904-13. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2084524?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

[7] Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman, "Accounts," *American Sociological Review* 33, no. 1 (1968): 46-62. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2092239?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

[8] Stephen Vaisey, "Motivation and Justification: A Dual-Process Model of Culture in Action," *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 6 (May 2009): 1675-1715. https://doi.org/10.1086/597179

[9] Icek Azjen and Martin Fishbein, "Attitude-Behavior Relations: A Theoretical Analysis and Review of Empirical Research," *Psychological Bulletin* 84, no. 5 (1977): 888-918; Irwin Deutscher, Fred Pestello and H. Francis Pestello, *Sentiments and Acts* (Hawthorne: Walter de Gruyter, Inc., 1993); Leon Festinger, *Conflict, Decision, and Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964); Allan Wicker, "Attitudes Versus Actions: The Relationship of Verbal and Overt Behavioral Responses to Attitude Objects," *Journal of Social Issues* 25, no. 4 (1969): 41-78.

[10] James Khalil, John Horgan, and Martine Zeuthen, "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, December 18, 2019, 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1699793.; Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley, *Friction, (*Oxford University Press; 1 edition March 2, 2011).

[11] Kathleen Blee, *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002); John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism (Political Violence)* (New York City: Routledge, 2014),; Sophia Mosklaenko and Clark McCauley, *Friction,* (Oxford University Press; 1 edition March 2, 2011); Pete Simi, Karyn Sporer, and Bryan Bubolz, "Narratives of Childhood Adversities and Adolescent Misconduct as Precursors to Violent Extremism: A Life-Course Criminological Approach." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency,* 53, no. 4 (2016): 536-63.

individuals toward violence. These are important pieces of the puzzle no doubt. Yet, ideas are not just important as a proximal variable, but, instead, are deeply intertwined with a host of other cultural factors resulting in a mosaic where individuals draw on ideas in much the way a person might draw from a roadmap for directions. Ideas are much less likely to inject or infect us as they are to provide a "toolkit" that helps us navigate the social world.[12]

Causal Trajectories of Extreme Right Violence

In short, the relationship between ideas and violence is unpredictable, multidirectional and paradoxical. Despite this complexity, there are several causal trajectories that can be discerned to help us more carefully understand the relationship between ideas and violence. First, some violence appears to be a relatively clear expression of a person's ideas reflecting what Kathleen Blee[13] refers to as "strategic violence." This does not mean ideas are the only factor motivating violence in these instances, but rather a central driving force marked by high degrees of planning focused on specific targets. The violence may be perpetrated by larger organizations, small cells, or single individuals acting on behalf of a larger cause, but the common denominator is the extent to which the violence is an expression of ideas intended to produce major social change.

In the section below, we rely on the far-right terror cell, the Silent Brotherhood, to illustrate the first trajectory. Founded by Robert Mathews, the Silent Brotherhood was organized in the 1980s for the explicit purpose to foment anti-government, white supremacist violence. Mathews' radicalization, however, began unfolding early in life; in 1964 at the age of 11, he serendipitously encountered a John Birch Society (JBS) publication, and, shortly thereafter, joined the organization. Founded by Robert Welch in 1958, the JBS are known for their rabid anti-communist conspiracy theories, and, in the 1960s, when Mathews became enamored with the JBS, were opposed to desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement .[14] Shortly before dropping out of high school, Mathews chose to forego a life-long dream of joining the military when he learned about the prosecution of Lt. William Calley for his role in the My Lai Massacre during the Vietnam War.[15] Instead of joining the military, Mathews graduated from the JBS to co-founding the Sons of Liberty, a small radical anti-communist militia. The Sons of Liberty were a relatively small organization with no more than 25 members and influenced by longtime

[12] Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986): 273-286.
[13] Kathleen Blee, "Women and Organized Racial Terrorism in the United States," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 421-433.
[14] Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right (Politics and Society in Modern America)* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).
[15] Kevin Flynn and Gary Gerhardt, *The Silent Brotherhood* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

Arizona-based tax protester, Marvin Cooley. In 1973, Mathews was arrested by Internal Revenue Service agents for providing false tax withholding information on employment records and sentenced to a six-month probation.

After completing his probation term, Mathews moved to the Pacific Northwest and entered a type of personal abeyance or resting period from his previous pattern of growing radicalization. During these years, Mathews committed himself to working long hours, building a new home, and settling down with his family. Eventually, however, Mathews' political convictions remerged with even greater vigor than before. This time, Mathews became associated with the Aryan Nations and National Alliance, attending events and promoting the idea of forming a white homeland in the Pacific Northwest.[16] But Mathews was impatient with the idea of only talking about these issues. He realized that radical talk and nonviolent political activism were too limited and that a revolutionary vanguard would be necessary to catalyze white Americans to action. After Mathews came to this determination, he began recruiting others he felt would be worthy comrades in an underground struggle. In 1983 Mathews and eight others founded a revolutionary cell they dubbed the Bruders Schweigen (German for Brothers Keep Silent). Once formed, they initiated a series of robberies, bombings, and political assassinations while simultaneously stockpiling a cache of weapons and safe houses across the country. Eventually, the Silent Brotherhood successfully robbed an armored truck at gun point of more than $3 million. Most of the funds were never recovered as the Silent Brotherhood scattered the money across the white supremacist movement providing important resources that helped sustain various organizations. Ultimately, Mathews was killed during a shoot-out with law enforcement and the remaining members were arrested and indicted as part of a criminal conspiracy.[17]

Part of the significance of this case lies in how clearly the Silent Brotherhood illustrates the potential for specific ideas to motivate a group's formation and its violent activities. Further, the Silent Brotherhood reflected a strategic initiative known as the "War of 84"; a declaration signed by leaders across the white supremacist movement in response to the death of Christian Identity adherent and farmer, Gordon Kahl who was killed in a shootout with police in 1983.[18] The declaration also reflected the extent the movement had embraced an apocalyptic and revolutionary position coming to view the federal government, in particular, as completely corrupted by an international Jewish conspiracy.

Even a relatively clear illustration of strategic violence, like the Silent Brotherhood, is

[16] Flynn and Gerhardt, *The Silent Brotherhood.*

[17] Flynn and Gerhardt, *The Silent Brotherhood.*

[18] James Corcoran, *Bitter Harvest: Gordon Kahl and the Rise of the Posse Comitatus in the Heartland* (Penguin Books, 1990).

nuanced. For example, the extent of ideological exposure and time spent becoming indoctrinated varied dramatically among members of the Silent Brotherhood. Some individuals like Mathews spent substantial time deliberating about their views, reading literature, and conversing with like-minded adherents. For individuals, like Mathews, ideas and action are deeply intertwined and represent a reciprocal relationship with important feedback loops. While ideas inform action; action simultaneously reinforces ideas. Only a relatively small number of individuals progress through the process the way Mathews did as most ultimately desist in response to various barriers that derail the person's radicalization.[19] Even Mathews desisted to some extent during his probation in Arizona and initial move to Metalline Falls, WA. On some level, however, Mathews' urges for seeking a cause overwhelmed his desire to live a quiet life with his family. What is interesting about Mathews is that he demonstrated this seekership at such an early age, suggesting some childhood socialization and/or personality dimension to his eventual embrace of violent extremism. His early attraction may also reflect what some observers refer to as "moral intuition," which includes unreflective attractions and repulsions.[20] By most accounts, Mathews seemed to "just know" that something "bad" was happening in the U.S. and violent action was necessary. Interestingly, other members of the Silent Brotherhood as well as subjects in our life history sample (although certainly not all) also reported similar moral intuitions at a young age.

While Mathews spent nearly his entire life immersed in radical ideas, Bruce Pierce's introduction to neo-Nazism transpired less than a year prior to taking the Silent Brotherhood oath and assuming one of the key leadership roles in the group. Others like, Ken Loff, only became involved because he lived next door to Mathews in Metaline Falls and the two had become close friends. Nonetheless, Loff provided the group with his newborn baby for the organization's initial baptism ritual of commitment that involved a pledge to fight for the future of the white race. Loff's decision to join the Silent Brotherhood was not borne from a deep ideological commitment but rather the personal loyalty he felt toward Mathews. At the same time, Loff's decision to move to the small town of Metalline Falls reflected his desire to leave a more diverse urban environment. In addition, Loff's relocation to Metaline Falls also reflected a certain level of antipathy toward racial minorities and the understanding that Metaline Falls would be almost, if not entirely, comprised of white residents. Over time, Mathews helped Loff frame his antipathy and concerns within a larger ideological context connected to hardcore white supremacist groups like the Aryan Nations and National Alliance. The motivation among members of the Silent Brotherhood varied and ideas were not the only important factor in their formation and eventual involvement in violence, but ideas were the principle

[19] Pete Simi and Stephen Windisch, *"*Why Radicalization Fails: Barriers to Mass Casualty Terrorism,*" Terrorism and Political Violence* (2018).
[20] Vaisey, "Motivation and Justification."

driving mechanism for the group's organization and their efforts to ignite a revolution.

The second trajectory, or what Kathleen Blee refers to as "narrative violence" represents a sort of inverse of the first one. [21] This trajectory may seem counter-intuitive but likely applies to a large portion of violent extremism. As compared to the first trajectory, where violence is motivated by specific ideas; in the second trajectory, violence itself, is used to produce certain outcomes such as ritualized bonding, building group cohesion, and meeting individual needs for excitement. The phrase "violence for the sake of violence" is an appropriate description of this trajectory. Political ideas are still part of this type of violence but are secondary to the *feelings* violence produces and, in turn, how individuals and groups come to understand the violence after the fact.

Narrative violence emphasizes the role of ideas on the "back-end" whereas strategic violence focuses on the "front-end" preceding violence. A tragic example of narrative violence involved a federal death penalty case I consulted on nearly 10 years ago when a small band of white supremacists in southern Florida who referred to themselves as Blood & Honour-Tampa (BHT) were convicted of murdering two homeless individuals (one white, one black) in the span of fewer than 24 hours. Neither murder was particularly well-planned but rather followed hours of heavy alcohol consumption as members sat around the group's "crashpad" listening to neo-Nazi music waiting for something to happen. The "something" came when one of the individuals mentioned that he knew where some "bums" were sleeping. The four piled into one of the members' cars, which was decked out with neo-Nazi paraphernalia and drove to a location where they believed they could find homeless individuals to attack. The first person they came upon was beaten with a tire iron and left to die. Several hours later, after more drinking and more weapons were acquired, the group of four left on a second "mission" to attack additional individuals. The second attack resulted in another murder when the group accosted a homeless person they encountered and one of the members used a hatchet to split the victim's skull. In an effort to seemingly provide purpose for the killings, the individual who wielded the hatchet later told the other members that "killing together bonds us forever." The perpetrator's statement suggests the motives for their violence remained unclear to the group reflecting the possibility that the murders were driven, in part, by a pathological and unspoken desire for excitement that might disrupt their otherwise mundane existence. Ironically, rather than creating greater cohesiveness among members, the murders led to quite the opposite outcome with the group dissolving shortly after the attacks. During a "cold case" investigation several years later, two former members secured lesser punishments in exchange for their cooperation and testimony. As a result, the two remaining members, including the individual who wielded the hatchet, received life sentences in federal prison.

[21] Blee, "Women and Organized Racial."

But the relationship between ideas and action in the instances of narrative violence are complicated. Even acts of violence that appear spontaneous may reflect an underlying expression of certain political ideas. Although BHT was loosely organized with informal group boundaries and leadership, the group existed because of a shared adherence to certain ideas. The group's violence and other activities more broadly represented ideas embedded in the larger white supremacist movement. Consistent with our life history interviews, BHT members were violent prior to becoming extremists but white supremacist ideas intensified and channeled those violent tendencies by providing members with a purpose and rationale.[22] The relatively spontaneous nature of narrative violence, however, means that perpetrators often attach the significance of ideas following the violence rather than preceding these acts. But the post-hoc rationale can become an important source of motivation for future violent behavior and help establish an ongoing modus operandi.

Prior to the murder of the two homeless individuals, BHT was involved in a series of nonlethal violent incidents targeting African-Americans, homosexuals, and anti-racists, yet the group never became organized in a more strategic sense as compared to the Silent Brotherhood nor did BHT's activities ever incorporate a highly organized and intentional effort to foment revolution. Political ideas motivated BHT's violence but to a different degree and in a different way than the Silent Brotherhood. Our life history data is replete with descriptions of relatively spontaneous violence that, nonetheless, was still linked to ideas that influenced target selection, choice of weapons, and various other situational characteristics.[23]

A third type of relationship between ideas and violent action is represented by the notion of distal effects. Individuals who commit political violence, like all of us, are born into a world not of our own making.[24] In the case of US-based right-wing extremism, racism is deeply entrenched in the American psyche and institutionalized within various systems of power. As part of this, "ordinary racism",[25] which is typically subtler than the racism advocated by neo-Nazi and Klan groups, is pervasive both on and offline. Not surprisingly, our life history data suggest informal family socialization consistent with racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic ideas is prevalent in the childhood and adolescent experiences of the vast majority of far right extremists we have interviewed.[26]

[22] Pete Simi, Karyn Sporer and Bryan Bubolz, "Narratives of Childhood Adversities and Adolescent Misconduct as Precursors to Violent Extremism: A Life-Course Criminological Approach," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 53, no. 4 (2016): 536-63.

[23] Steven Windisch, Pete Simi, Kathleen Blee, and Matthew DeMichele, "Understanding the Micro-Situational Dynamics of White Supremacist Violence in the United States." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6 (2018): 23-37.

[24] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon," *Die Revolution* (1852).

[25] Philomena Essed*, Understanding Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory* (Newbury Park: Sage Publishers, 1991).

[26] Pete Simi, Katherine Blee, DeMichele and Steven Windisch, "Addicted to Hate"; Simi, Sporer, and Bubolz,

Most subjects were not raised by members of extremist groups but were exposed to ideas that might be described as precursors or building blocks for the kind of "extraordinary racism" expressed by organized hate groups. Exposure to racist socialization alone is insufficient for becoming an extremist but the evidence suggests, at a distal level, these family experiences play an important role in preparing a person for their eventual involvement in right-wing extremism.

Racist family socialization establishes symbolic boundaries that prescribe and proscribe various values and norms related to highly personal aspects of everyday life such as the permissibility of inter-racial friendships and romantic relationships.[27] At the same time, this type of family socialization also helps establish broader conceptions of social organization that reinforce stereotypes such as certain racial groups having greater criminal propensity. Racist family socialization also introduces children to terms such as various dehumanizing epithets. The exposure to these ideas generates familiarity while de-sensitizing the person to any external stigma associated with the beliefs that underpin these words. This finding is helpful in terms of underscoring the continuity between everyday racism and extraordinary racism as well as emphasizing the indirect and indeterminate influence this type of socialization exerts as part of a larger chain of events that may eventually result in violent extremism.

Finally, the fourth trajectory suggests a negative relationship between ideas and violence. In this respect, the expression of extreme ideas may diminish the risk of a person engaging in violent behavior. The expression of a violent idea may, in some cases, provide an emotional release by relieving (at least temporarily) the person's sense of anger and frustration. This helps explain why most people who "mouth off" do not commit acts of violence. Mouthing off satisfies the person's desire for action. As a result, "higher risk" forms of action such as actual violent behavior, may become unnecessary. Of course, that very same person may also, over time, become less satisfied with talk and come to decide that "talk is cheap." In these cases, the individual may ultimately decide that violence is the only way to "walk the walk" as was the case with Robert Mathews. The indeterminate relationship between ideas and violence means individuals respond in highly divergent ways to the same conditions and situations, leaving the goal of prediction untenable, and, frankly, dangerous. Too many "false positives" means an overreliance on using radical ideas as a threat indicator is unreliable and runs the risk of circumscribing constitutionally protected speech.

"Narratives of Childhood Adversity".

[27] Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 28 (2002): 167-195.

Conclusion

Violent extremism is defined, in part, by the extent that a perpetrator(s) whose violence is motivated by certain types of ideas (political or religious) and infuses that violence with a symbolic message meant for public consumption. The communication process including the reception of that message, however, is anything but simple. In some cases, a message may be poorly conceived while in other cases the most clearly conveyed message may still fall on "deaf ears".[28] The lack of recognition that a violent incident expresses a particular political or religious ideology is closely tied to the general public's (including policymakers, practitioners, media, and scholars) perceptions of what "counts" as terrorism. And, of course, those perceptions are subject to all sorts of biases.

In order to unpack some of the ways in which ideas and violence are related, this essay identified four types of relationships although the list is certainly not exhaustive. First, strategic violence represents relatively organized and planned acts of violence designed for a specific political purpose, while narrative violence tends to be more spontaneous where actors construct more elaborate explanations following the incident rather than before. Compared to narrative violence, strategic violence is likely to involve beliefs that reflect a higher degree of internalization and discursive consciousness, whereas, narrative violence may reflect a greater degree of unconscious cognitive processes. Of course, this distinction refers to a difference in degree rather than kind as any type of violence involves both conscious and unconscious processes. Narrative violence may also serve as a "training ground" that prepares individuals for more strategic types of violence. In short, ideas matter but their influence is complex and multi-directional. Sometimes influence is proximal and more direct and other times influence is distal and indirect.

Lastly and paradoxically, sometimes violent ideas lead to inaction rather than action. Fortunately, there is far more violent talk than violent acts. While ideas influence violent action in a variety of ways, ideas are poor predictors of behavior. Most individuals and groups who endorse violent ideas never participate in violence themselves. As such, an exclusive focus on ideas alone over-determines our understanding and explanation of violent behavior. As an increasing number of studies challenge a straightforward relationship between ideas and violent extremism, we run the risk of "throwing the baby out with the bathwater" in terms of suggesting that ideas do not matter. The trick is to continue to refine our understanding of how and when ideas are most important as factors in a complex system that, in some cases, ultimately produces violence. Among other things, this will require that terrorism studies continue to expand its focus beyond Islamic extremism which the field has been embarrassingly slow to do.

[28] Paul Wilkinson, "The Media and Terrorism: A Reassessment," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no.2 (Summer 1997): 51-64.