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## Organizational [Dis]trust: Comparing Disengagement Among Former Left-Wing and Right-Wing Violent Extremists

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### ABSTRACT

In order to move beyond the existing push/pull framework to understand disengagement, we apply a systematic coding scheme derived from Mayer and colleagues' integrative model of organizational trust to examine why people leave extremist groups. In doing so, we also rely on in-depth life history interviews with twenty former left- and right-wing extremists to examine whether antecedents of distrust vary between the two groups. Findings suggest substantial similarities and important differences between left- and right-wing extremists' decision to leave. In particular, perceptions of poor planning and organization, low-quality personnel and vindictive behavior generate perceptions of organizational distrust and disillusionment. Although findings from the current study are based on a relatively small sample, notable similarities were identified between both groups regarding sources of distrust (e.g., leaders, group members). We also identified differences regarding the role of violence in weakening solidarity and nurturing disillusionment with extremist activities. We conclude this article with suggestions for future research that extend the study of terrorism and that may have significance for how practitioners address countering violent extremism initiatives.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Based on Altier and colleagues' recommendation to move beyond explanations of disengagement that identify push/pull factors,<sup>1</sup> we apply Mayer and colleagues' model of organizational trust to extremist exit.<sup>2</sup> The benefit of such a framework is the ability to focus on how people cognitively and emotionally express themselves when engaging in an organizational role.<sup>3</sup> Since disengagement has been found to be influenced by individuals' cognitive and emotional state,<sup>4</sup> it may prove useful to gain a better understanding of the psychological antecedents of organizational exit. Moreover, due to the analogous group structures and internal dynamics shared among violent extremist groups and conventional organizations,<sup>5</sup> such an investigation may provide unique similarities and differentiators between these groups.

One theme identified in the organizational disengagement literature is the importance of psychological trust, particularly perceptions of trust among leaders and followers.<sup>6</sup> In

general, trust refers to the willingness to be vulnerable to the intentions of another person.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have long emphasized the organizational benefits when trust is high<sup>8</sup> as well as the consequences when it is low.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, previous studies of disengagement from violent extremism typically do not employ existing theoretical models to analyze the factors that influence disengagement.<sup>10</sup> Based on the utility of trust in predicting a variety of attitudinal and performance goals, we ask the following interrelated questions: (1) What is the role of distrust in disillusionment and disengagement from extremist organizations? (2) Who are the primary conduits of this distrust in extremist organizations? Aside from utilizing the proposed theoretical model, we also include a comparative dimension to our study. More specifically, we ask: (3) Are findings regarding the antecedents of distrust robust across left-wing and right-wing extremist organizations? Doing so provides an important opportunity to analyze whether different types of ideological extremism involve unique organizational characteristics. To answer these questions, we rely on life history interviews with twenty former left-wing and right-wing U.S. domestic violent extremists. In the next sections, we discuss several key concepts that guide our analysis.

## Organizational Engagement and Trust

In recent years, social scientists have dedicated a considerable amount of resources to understanding the concept of organizational engagement.<sup>11</sup> According to Schaufeli and colleagues, engagement refers to a “positive, fulfilling work related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption.”<sup>12</sup> Prior research focused on work engagement suggests that high levels of engagement generate organizational commitment, lower absenteeism and turnover rates, improved health, and wellbeing as well as higher performance and increased job satisfaction.<sup>13</sup> Researchers have also found that work engagement is fostered through a variety of job resource conditions including support from co-workers, task variety, performance feedback, coaching, and training facilities<sup>14</sup> as well as personal dimensions such as hope, a positive work environment, and compassion.<sup>15</sup> One of the most prominent elements, however, is a shared sense of trust between leaders and followers of an organization.<sup>16</sup>

While several definitions have been provided in previous studies,<sup>17</sup> we define organizational trust as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another.”<sup>18</sup> According to Tan and Tan, there is no single factor which so thoroughly affects human behavior as trust.<sup>19</sup> The growing importance of trust stems from the fact that it impacts a variety of organizational outcomes.<sup>20</sup> For instance, when employees trust that competent decisions can be made by their organization, it strengthens their sense of a future with the group,<sup>21</sup> promotes cooperation and job satisfaction<sup>22</sup> and leads to superior levels of performance.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, trust has been directly related to an organization’s capacity to form new relationships necessary to accomplish goals and, therefore, is predictive of whether an organization will remain sustainable in the future.<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, organizations should strive to cultivate trust since distrust generates a variety of problems including weak commitment,<sup>25</sup> burn-out,<sup>26</sup> and low performance.<sup>27</sup>

Even though many factors have been proposed, three facets of organizational trust have the most empirical support: ability, benevolence, and integrity.<sup>28</sup> *Ability* refers to a set of skills and competencies that enable a party to have influence within a specific domain. Organizations with high levels of ability are viewed as capable problem solvers.<sup>29</sup> *Integrity*

refers to the expectation that organizations tell the truth and display a sense of fairness or moral character that can help individuals cope with uncertainty. Finally, *benevolence* reflects the expectation that organizations have good intentions and will do well to their members without succumbing to egocentric or opportunistic behavior. Taken together, these three facets provide a framework to analyze the presence (or absence) of trust among members of an organization.

Related, psychological contract theory focuses on conditions in which initial trust in organizations deteriorates.<sup>30</sup> In situations when expectancies about the organization's ability, integrity, and benevolence are violated, individuals experience a heightened perception that the organization violated its psychological contract with them and thus experience the affective outcomes of distrust.<sup>31</sup> In an examination of the relationship between trust and psychological contract break, Robinson conducted a longitudinal study of newly hired individuals.<sup>32</sup> She found that individuals with low initial trust in their employer experienced heightened levels of distrust after the perceived breach of contract. In a meta-analysis of psychological contract theory and distrust, Zhao and colleagues found changes in job performance, extra-role behaviors (e.g., teamwork), organizational commitment, and intentions to remain in the organization (i.e., disengagement) were related to deteriorating trust.<sup>33</sup>

Most scholars agree that it is easier to destroy trust than to create it,<sup>34</sup> but it is less clear what the important conduits are to distrust. Pursuing the effects of violated expectancies on people's trust in institutions, Zimmer argued that individuals, when making judgments regarding institutional trustworthiness, tend to overgeneralize from vivid, highly salient events involving institutions and their leaders.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, individuals tend to use the behaviors of institutional leaders as reference points for appraising the trustworthiness of the institution in general. Consequently, Zimmer posited that the behavior of organizational leaders may "unknowingly or indirectly define reality" in significant and enduring ways.<sup>36</sup> In this way, if a person believes in the trustworthiness of an organization or administrators of that organization, he and/or she may experience heightened levels of commitment and satisfaction.<sup>37</sup> Alternatively, in situations where trust is violated, individuals may generalize this to the entire organization and develop defense mechanisms, avoid taking responsibility, feel suspicious, and disaffirm organizational goals.<sup>38</sup>

Based on the utility of trust in predicting one's level of organizational commitment and satisfaction, findings from the current study can improve our understanding of disengagement from terrorist organizations. For instance, building on Altier and colleagues' study of extremist disengagement, the current project may provide additional insight into Rusbult and colleagues' investment model.<sup>39</sup> In general, this model posits that one's commitment to a given social role or organization is influenced by the satisfaction derived from involvement, available alternatives (e.g., returning to school, starting a professional career), and expended investments (e.g., money, time, and energy). In this way, trust may be one factor that influences the satisfaction component and hence, the likelihood of disengagement. For example, individuals with high levels of trust may feel their investments are well spent and will not consider alternative opportunities. These individuals are likely to feel satisfied and committed to both the organization and to fellow group members. Alternatively, individuals who view the organization or its members as distrustful may begin to question their spent investments and look for alternative ventures. Finally, if robust findings exist in conventional organizations among underlying facets of trust (e.g., perceptions of ability, integrity, and benevolence) and organizational outcomes exist, as well as the antecedents and

consequences to the deterioration of trust, it makes sense to examine how these relationships exist in other types of organizations—namely, violent extremist organizations.

## Extremist Disengagement and Disillusionment

While terrorism researchers have developed theories and models to explain the process of accepting extremist beliefs,<sup>40</sup> research exploring disengagement from violent extremism is less developed.<sup>41</sup> The systematic understanding of disengagement has substantial implications as governmental and nongovernmental efforts have emerged to design programs that facilitate exit from violent extremism.<sup>42</sup> In particular, findings from this line of research can be used to inform the development of counter-messaging strategies designed to influence disengagement processes. Additionally, a more robust understanding of the factors that lead to disengagement can help inform how intervention programs should provide support to individuals leaving extremist groups such as therapy and family counseling.

Currently, terrorism literature highlights a complex web of micro- and macro-level push (i.e., negative considerations that induce members to leave) and pull factors (i.e., positive considerations that attract members to another life) that compel disengagement from extremist groups. For example, terrorism scholars have identified a variety of contextual factors influencing one's decision to exit including fear of imprisonment,<sup>43</sup> "burn out" that accompanies living a conspiratorial lifestyle,<sup>44</sup> moral/religious hesitancy,<sup>45</sup> and life changes such as starting a family or finding steady employment.<sup>46</sup>

Terrorism researchers have also found that disillusionment is a major factor contributing to disengagement.<sup>47</sup> Disillusionment is best understood as the realization that a consistent incongruence exists between idealized expectations and the everyday realities associated with those same expectations.<sup>48</sup> For example, an individual may join an extremist group to receive protection but later become disillusioned by the reality they are at risk of victimization by fellow group members. While there are many sources of disillusionment, prior terrorism research highlights a series of contributing factors such as violence,<sup>49</sup> loss of faith,<sup>50</sup> and tactical disagreement.<sup>51</sup>

In an attempt to further this line of research, the current article focuses on how people cognitively and emotionally express themselves when disengaging from an organizational role.<sup>52</sup> Since disengagement has been found to be influenced by individuals' cognitive and emotional state,<sup>53</sup> a better understanding of one's psychological presence while engaging in role performances should help identify key antecedents of disillusionment and disengagement. In the next section, we provide an overview of two U.S. domestic violent extremist ideologies, which we rely on for comparative analyses.

## Violent Extremism in the United States

In the decade following 9/11, the threat of extremist violence generated substantial attention,<sup>54</sup> yet, much of that attention has focused on violent *ihadists* while ignoring the threat from other types of political extremists.<sup>55</sup> U.S.-based extremist groups, however, also pose a substantial danger.<sup>56</sup> To gain a more comprehensive understanding of extremism, terrorism scholarship would benefit from empirical studies examining multiple ideological backgrounds. To address this concern, we conducted a comparative analysis that examines disengagement processes between former right-wing and left-wing extremists in the United States.

## **Right-Wing Extremism**

We consider right-wing extremism as constituting an overlapping web of movements that include various Ku Klux Klans, neo-Nazis, Christian Identity, White power skinheads, and antigovernment militia, patriot, and sovereign citizen movements. While substantial ideological and stylistic differences exist across these right-wing organizations, members agree on some basic doctrines.<sup>57</sup> First, right-wing extremism typically promotes an uncompromising belief in ethnonational, ideological, and religious superiority. Right-wing extremists picture themselves as champions of a natural order that has been attacked by adversarial interests.<sup>58</sup> They idealize conservative traditional male-dominant heterosexual families and loathe homosexuality, interracial marriage, and mixed procreation.<sup>59</sup> Second, violence is sometimes selected as a justifiable option because right-wing extremists believe that they are defending racial, cultural, and/or religious purity.<sup>60</sup>

## **Left-Wing Extremism**

In general, left-wing extremism includes movements that subscribe to a variety of Marxist-Lennist, Mao, Castro, anarchical, and antiglobalization ideologies. Whether their actions are characterized as retaliation for police brutality,<sup>61</sup> protection of the environment,<sup>62</sup> or destroying the status quo in the name of the underclass,<sup>63</sup> left-wing groups believe that the political and social structure of the United States is corrupt. It should be noted that because there is no uniform conceptualization of “left-wing,” given the malleable nature of leftist ideology,<sup>64</sup> and due to the fact that single-issue organizations such as environmentalist and animal rights movements (e.g., Earth Liberation Front [ELF] and Animal Liberation Front [ALF]) share common ideological elements with other left-wing organizations (e.g., the belief that everything [e.g., animals, rocks, humans] is equal, anti-capitalism sentiment that government is corrupt, and the support of radical strategies such as destruction to properties), we classify the ELF and ALF as a subset of leftist groups for the present effort.<sup>65</sup> Many left-wing groups seek to redistribute economic wealth and services to lower classes. In doing so, left-wing extremists often view direct action (e.g., sabotage, bombings) as a viable political tactic because they consider themselves to be at war with an oppressive governmental system.<sup>66</sup> Eagan argues there are three central elements that left-wing extremist groups share including an uncompromising position, status as a grass roots party, and an ideology that encourages supporters to engage in “direct actions” (versus non-violent ideological activities).<sup>67</sup> Subsequently, groups on the left such as the radical environmentalist movement, the Weather Underground Organization, and the Black Liberation Army, have robbed banks and armored cars, planted bombs at military facilities and businesses, and assassinated prominent political figures in the United States.<sup>68</sup>

## **Methodology**

### **Data Collection**

Data for this study were derived from life history interviews with individuals who self-identified as former far-left and far-right extremists. Members for this study were recruited for participation through a purposive snowball sampling technique. As it is difficult to identify the population of all former members to serve as a sampling frame, we identified interviewees by snowball sampling from multiple starts to ensure variety in the location and type of

extremist group.<sup>69</sup> We developed initial contacts for the snowball chains through a variety of means, including our research team's extensive prior research with active and inactive far-right and far-left extremists, by identifying former extremists with a public presence (e.g., media, book authors, lecture series), and by using referrals by our project partners. The authors benefited from advice by three prominent human rights groups: Anti-Defamation League, Simon Wiesenthal Center, and Southern Poverty Law Center; and from an outreach organization, Life After Hate, that assists individuals leave far-right extremist groups.

Each of the initial participants were asked to provide referrals to other former extremists who might also be willing to participate in an interview. Snowball sampling is a common technique when trying to gain access to otherwise elusive populations<sup>70</sup> and has been used extensively in terrorism and gang research.<sup>71</sup> Rapport was established and maintained through regular contact via telephone, e-mail, and social media. Prior to contacting participants, researchers obtained Internal Review Board (IRB) approval to include human participants in the current study. In general, both left-wing and right-wing participants were willing and able to participate in the life history interviews. On a few cases, researchers were unable to conduct the interview because of scheduling conflicts or personal obligations.

The current study relies on two subsamples of participants. The first contains ten former right-wing extremists (e.g., Ku Klux Klan) consisting of one female and nine male participants whose ages range from 35 years to 52 years of age. Among the right-wing extremists, two individuals described their socioeconomic status as lower-class and eight described themselves as working-class. In terms of education, one individual received less than a high school diploma, three received a high school diploma, two attended college and three received some form of college degree. The level of group involvement for these members included two individuals who founded an extremist group and eight participants who were either core or peripheral members. In terms of length of involvement for right-right extremists, membership ranged from 5 to 22 years ( $SD = 5.17$ ). Regarding organizational affiliation, right-wing participants were dispersed among eight different groups. These individuals held memberships in various right-wing organizations such as Ku Klux Klans, national social movements, and neo-Nazi and racist skinhead groups. Of the ten right-wing participants, eight individuals were unknown to one another.

The second sample included ten former left-wing extremists (e.g., environmentalist, anarchist) consisting of two female and eight male participants whose ages ranged from 24 years to 70 years of age. Among left-wing extremists, two individuals described their socioeconomic status as lower-class, three as working-class, and five described themselves as middle-class. In terms of education, two individuals received less than a high school diploma, one received a high school diploma, four attended college, and three received a graduate degree. The level of group involvement for these members included one individual who founded an extremist group and nine participants who were either core or peripheral members. In terms of length of involvement for left-wing extremists, membership ranged from 1 to 37 years ( $SD = 12.44$ ). Regarding organizational affiliation, left-wing participants were dispersed among eight different groups. These individuals held memberships in a variety of anarchical, animal rights, civil rights, and anti-globalization movements. Of the ten left-wing participants, eight individuals were unknown to one another. All names, locations, and organizational titles used in this article are pseudonyms to conceal the identities of our participants.

## Procedures and Data Analyses

Most of the interview was spent eliciting an in-depth life history to produce narratives that reflect the complexities and intersectionality of identity, ideology, and life experiences.<sup>72</sup> Life narratives, or thematically related events that individuals use to form their personal identity,<sup>73</sup> can be strong indicators of how people structure and make sense of their world both emotionally and cognitively.<sup>74</sup> Interviews relied on a semi-structured interview protocol and were conducted in private settings such as hotel rooms and residential homes and public settings such as restaurants and coffee shops. The interviews included questions about broad phases of the participant's extremism such as entry, involvement, and disengagement, with probes to encourage participants to elaborate on aspects of their life histories. While participants were periodically asked direct questions to focus on specific topic areas, the interviews emphasized an unstructured format intended to generate unsolicited data embedded in their personal narrative. Each interview concluded with more structured questions and scale items to collect comparable information across interviewees in terms of risk factors (e.g., childhood abuse, mental illness), demographic information, and criminality. As one indication of the detail of the data collection, the interview sample generated 3,018 transcribed pages discussing the participants' experiences prior to, during and following involvement in violent extremism.

In terms of analyses, the initial coding process involved various steps but began by reading entire interview transcripts line-by-line to determine differences and similarities within and across our participants. As part of line-by-line coding, we relied on a systematic content coding system derived from Mayer and colleagues' model of organizational trust to identify overarching themes, specific events, and markers of distrust expressed by participants during their interviews.<sup>75</sup> Relying on the coding scheme outlined in the [Appendix](#), raters coded each interview and identified as many distrust markers (e.g., poor planning, weak moral character, fraudulent or hypocritical behavior, self-involved or inconsiderate behavior) that could be coded. After researchers completed the coding process for each participant, frequencies for all three distrust variables were summed and recorded. Once all participants were coded, final ratings were discussed and reviewed among all authors for quality assurance. In the following sections, we present qualitative findings that illustrate the role of organizational distrust and how these feelings influence disillusionment and disengagement.

## Results

Based on the results from the coding system derived from Mayer and colleagues' organizational trust model, perceptions of low ability, low integrity, and low benevolence characterized both left-wing and right-wing samples.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, these factors were found among both group leaders and rank-n-file members of the organization. It is important to note that perceptions of low ability, low integrity, and low benevolence are not mutually exclusive as a large portion of our sample ( $n = 15$ ; 75 percent) discussed a combination of these elements contributing to feelings of distrust. Specifically, we identified five participants who reported one factor, eleven reported two factors, and four participants who reported all three factors. While there is uniformity at the construct level, results lack empirical uniformity among left-wing and right-wing participants. By this, we mean that rather than identifying a set of universal characteristics, a variety of factors influenced our participants' perceptions of low ability, low integrity, and low benevolence. In general, we identified distrust with leadership

and organizational abilities, dissatisfaction in group personnel and victimization as contributing to our participants' perceptions of distrust. In the following sections, we present qualitative data from the life history interviews that illustrate each of these factors and their influence on disengagement processes.

### **Low Ability**

By low ability, we mean an inadequate or weak set of skills, competencies, and characteristics that hinder organizational influence and goal attainment.<sup>77</sup> Based on the current analyses, perceptions of poor planning and organization, disagreement with tactical decision making and weak leadership represented a major grievance contributing to perceptions of low ability and distrust between both left-wing ( $n = 6$ ; 60 percent) and right-wing ( $n = 8$ ; 80 percent) participants. For instance, Paul a former member of the Green Action, described losing trust in the group's organizational abilities after he was arrested during an impromptu protest.

I was like, "this [arrest] is going to wreck my life." I was angry because it was a poor strategy, poor planning, poor communication. ... Like what are you guys even doing running an activist campaign when you can't manage this basic level stuff? That started to rub me the wrong way. ... It was like a violation of trust ... felt so betrayed. I'm okay with putting myself on the line if I know coming into it but I'm not okay with this. I was just like I don't trust these folks anymore. ... I used it to negotiate how I felt about it. I've been so close that I hadn't really allowed myself to be critical and by the end I just couldn't do this anymore. I was exhausted. (Paul, Green Action, 2016)

Paul's experience underscores our central argument in which distrust directed toward the group functions as a source of disillusionment that weakens ideological and organizational commitments. Although Paul indicated a willingness to participate in high-risk activities, he felt the group had "violated his trust" by showing a lack of concern for his personal freedom, which created separation from group activities.<sup>78</sup> Paul's experience also underscores prior research that focuses on the role of anger in solidifying discontent and disillusionment when it is directed toward extremist activities.<sup>79</sup> In this situation, distrust and anger with the group's organizational abilities allowed Paul to critically evaluate the group's actions and his future involvement with the organization.

Right-wing participants also discussed issues with organizational planning and coordination. For instance, Roger a former member of Volksfront discusses his resentment toward the organization's inability to attract and assemble a body of supporters to the group's cause and strengthen the reputation of the group.

It's a disaster. They think they are going to have to be involved in holy war and they can't even organize one organization. ... How are they going to stand up and say, "We speak up for the white race?" Hell, they couldn't even get 100 people to show up. There is no organization. ... It didn't take me long to realize that they are not going anywhere. ... I have not given up on my beliefs but I am done with the organizations. It has gotten to be mass marketed, partying, demonstrations, a lot of bitching and moaning, but no real constructive work. (Roger, Volksfront, 2016)

Throughout Roger's interview, he discusses how distrust with the leadership often created "drama" and "gossip" among rank-n-file members. Based on prior research, suspicion and jealousy have been found to disrupt collaboration among members leading to organizational fissures and disengagement.<sup>80</sup> Roger's account also illustrates the potential for poor

leadership to create a sense of ineffectiveness and ambiguity regarding the future direction of the group.

Both Paul and Roger's accounts are consistent with studies that suggest increased distrust regarding organizational decision making weakens an individual's future orientation related to the group.<sup>81</sup> From this perspective, distrust with the group's leadership and organizational abilities have the potential to reduce the appeal of extremist participation and generate doubt regarding future involvement. Moreover, both accounts illustrate how distrust seems to be a mechanism that influences an individual's level of satisfaction. For instance, once these individuals distanced themselves from the organizations, they were able to reflect and evaluate their expended investments and the availability of alternative ventures.<sup>82</sup> Upon reflection, both Roger and Paul's dissatisfaction was high enough to weaken organizational commitments and begin the disengagement process. In addition to perceptions of low ability, we also identified low integrity as contributing to perceptions of organizational distrust.

### **Low Integrity**

For eight left-wing (80 percent) and seven right-wing (70 percent) participants, dissatisfaction with the quality of group members was identified as an important factor leading to perceptions of low integrity. For purposes of the current study, low integrity refers to a set of organizational and interpersonal values and actions that members found dishonorable, fraudulent, morally weak, and/or ill-intentioned. For these individuals, inconsistency with the core values of community and support emphasized by the group eroded their trust and generated concerns about fellow members' ideological commitment and authenticity. For instance, the following former left-wing extremists discuss how distrust with the standards and morals of their fellow members contributed to perceptions of low integrity and aided their eventual exit from violent extremism.

I started noticing things. ... They were sucking off the donations. Everybody was jobless. They just seemed loose morally. These girls just took their clothes off right in front of us and jumped in the swimming pool and I thought that was disrespectful. It was so blatant like in our face and pushing it on us ... I was like, "Wait a minute, this doesn't feel comfortable." (Calli, Earth Night Action Group, 2014)

I have a sense of fairness and justice. Everybody should be getting their hands dirty equally and if I've got to get up at 4:30 in the morning and I don't get a chance to take a shower. ... But everybody else has cars and they're sleeping in nice houses. I thought that was unfair... this really bothered me and I couldn't ignore it anymore and it isn't right. ... I didn't complain but I didn't associate. ... I thought about it a lot and I begin to contemplate what I got into. (Marco, United Racial Struggle, 2016)

Both Calli and Marco felt that members of the organization no longer complemented them as individuals. This finding aligns with prior disengagement literature indicating that individuals who do not act in accord with the group's projected ideals can lose the trust of members.<sup>83</sup> Calli's experience, in particular, underscores the importance of respect in creating solidarity among extremists. In the absence of shared admiration, members may be less likely to depend on one another and accept their credibility. These features have been found to erode organizational effectiveness and commitments as well as membership satisfaction.<sup>84</sup> As such, when individual behaviors conflict with the group's core values, there is potential

for members to doubt these individuals' integrity and reject them as a representative of the broader collective ideology.<sup>85</sup>

Right-wing participants also indicated distrust with the quality of group personnel. For instance, Rachael a former member of Aryan Nations discusses the low class of people that characterized her chapter.

I got looking at the people that the movement had attracted. I said, "Hell no. I don't want my kid around these people. I sure as hell wouldn't want them in my house." ... The class of people that started coming around, you had more crack heads and people who want to lay drunk 24/7, wouldn't work. ... I was burnt out. Once you are away from it you start realizing most of the white guys you know were living on welfare, doing drugs, beating their wives and general shady people. ... That honestly dishearten me a lot with the movement because most of the people in it were just there to hang out and get drunk. (Rachael, Aryan Nations, 2015)

Similar to left-wing participants, Rachael's account illustrates the presence of emotional fatigue as contributing to disillusionment and disengagement. These findings support prior terrorism research that highlights the role of "burnout" in weakening ideological commitments associated with extremist activities.<sup>86</sup> For Rachael, the low quality of personnel generated distrust and became a source of discontent with the White supremacist movement. Feelings of distrust toward the organization allowed Rachael to distance herself from the group and provided her the opportunities to reassess why she originally became a White supremacist. This distance allowed Rachael to realize that many of the qualities she valued were absent from the organization. This realization manifested itself when Rachael came to see her fellow members as "shady people." Over time, incongruence between expectations and reality generated feelings of distrust, disillusionment, and eventually disengagement.

As illustrated among both left-wing and right-wing participants, distrust toward group personnel weakened solidarity and generated a cognitive and/or physical distance from the group. Whether participants came to doubt the moral character or trustworthiness of fellow members, perceptions of low integrity prompted feelings of disillusionment, which motivated members to disengage from extremist activities. Similar to previous accounts, creating distance between oneself and the group allowed these participants a reflection period where they were able to evaluate their level of satisfaction, availability of alternatives, and investments.<sup>87</sup> For these individuals, their commitments to the group were weakened as a result of low-integrity personnel and as a result they decided to leave the group. Finally, these accounts support prior terrorism studies that identify the potential for organizational behaviors to violate a person's norms and initiate the disengagement process.<sup>88</sup> The final dimension contributing to distrust is a lack of benevolence.

### **Low Benevolence**

For both left-wing ( $n = 5$ ; 50 percent) and right-wing ( $n = 8$ ; 80 percent) participants, perception of low benevolence represented a major component contributing to organizational distrust. By low benevolence, we refer to the extent to which the organizational leadership, or its members, work against the best interests of those in the group. Participants often characterized their organization as lacking compassion, acting hypocritical, violent, and/or vindictive toward one another.

For instance, Ashley, a former member of the Earth Protection United, describes the group's lack of responsiveness and concern after she became a victim of a violent crime and how this made her question the organization's genuineness.

I became a victim of a violent crime. I tried to solicit help and they were completely unhelpful ... these are people that I've known for years and I felt like we barely knew each other and that came into focus. ... I found the people who were supportive were my apolitical friends. ... So, this is like a huge turning point. I'm starting to realize this community isn't genuine ... they didn't care about you as people, as much as they cared about you as organizers. ... I was distrustful of the whole thing and their intentions. ... I'm starting to get burned out and feel less emotionally in common. ... I felt like the person that sits in church and is thinking about everything but being in church, who's mumbling the hymns but doesn't believe what they're saying. ... At this point, I start my gradual exit. (Ashley, Earth Protection United, 2016)

For Ashley, the combination of victimization and not receiving support from fellow group members led her to question their concern for her safety and well-being. As such, losing trust in the organization's ability to respond appropriately weakened Ashley's organizational commitment, which allowed her to pull away from the group. This finding is consistent with prior research that found extremists can lose trust in their organization when it does not effectively respond to members' individual needs.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, these findings support prior literature that found a lack of interpersonal dialogue between members erodes solidarity and contributes to disengagement.<sup>90</sup> After receiving support from her non-political friends, Ashley came to the realization that her relationships in the organization were disingenuous and centered on ideological uniformity rather than genuine consideration. Following this negative experience, Ashley found a new housemate (her sibling) and decided to finish college rather than continue with her political involvement. Similar to other participants, creating a distance from the organization allowed Ashley to see the contradictions in the group and reflect on her current and future involvement with the group. Doing so, Ashley was able to reflect on her past extremist participation and realize a disjunction existed between her expectations and the reality of extremist participation. This realization produced disillusionment with the group, effectively reducing Ashley's ideological and organizational commitments.

A distinguishing feature between left-wing and right-participants was the prevalence of infighting and backstabbing. Although findings are based on a relatively small sample size, right-wing participants ( $n = 8$ ; 80 percent) reported a substantially higher prevalence of in-fighting than left-wing participants ( $n = 2$ ; 20 percent) when discussing factors that influenced perceptions of low benevolence. For example, Jared, a former National Alliance member, describes attending a celebration party following the birth of his first child and being jumped by fellow members. As with other participants, this experience generated feelings of stress and distrust that created separation from the organization.

I went to a party. I had my son, it's supposed to be sort of like celebration, I'm bringing another white kid into this world. ... We're in the backyard and I'm drinking a beer and then all of a sudden one guy, Adam, comes out of nowhere and beats the living crap out of me ... they're like, "oh man, you're living around a bunch of Mexicans." I was considered a traitor. ... Right there was basically when I stopped going to functions. I felt betrayed. ... I go to a party and I get my ass beat. There for a while, I felt like I had to always be looking over my shoulder. At that point, I was totally out of the skinhead element. (Jared, National Alliance, 2015)

Jared discusses feeling betrayed and concerned for his future safety following this violent altercation. This finding is consistent with previous research that suggests a critical turning point for some extremists occurs when members no longer support each other or when they are victimized by another member.<sup>91</sup> Similar to other participants, feelings of distrust helped create distance between Jared and the organization. This distance provided Jared with an opportunity to perceive the contradictions in the group and reassess the importance of extremist participation. Such an experience allowed Jared to reflect on his current and future involvement in the group moving forward. These findings provide additional understanding to Rusbult and colleagues' investment model by illustrating the manner in which someone assesses their level of commitment. From this perspective, each of these accounts illustrates how distrust and distancing oneself from extremist activities allowed these individuals to reflect and evaluate their organizational commitments based on their expended investments and available alternatives.

Overall, a wide range of dysfunctional organizational processes characterized both left-wing and right-wing samples including poor planning and organizational abilities, a lack of satisfaction with group personnel, and witnessing hypocritical, violent, and/or vindictive behavior toward one another. These factors contributed to perceptions of low ability, low integrity, and low benevolence, which cumulatively generated organizational distrust.

## Discussion

In this article, we moved beyond existing push/pull frameworks for explaining disengagement by relying on a systematic coding scheme derived from Mayer and colleagues' model of organizational trust to examine why people leave extremist groups. Results suggest that low ability, low integrity, and low benevolence explain a major portion of distrust, which was found to erode internal group relationships. In general, each of these factors undermines the group's cohesiveness and solidarity, which nurtured disillusionment and prompted members to disengage from extremist activities. Notable similarities were identified between both left- and right-wing participants regarding antecedents of distrust. For instance, both samples discussed how dissatisfying behaviors stemming from group leaders and fellow members contributed to feelings of distrust.

At the same time, we also identified differences between both groups concerning the influence of violence on distrust. While left-wing participants often indicated that distrust stemmed from a lack of support from group members following victimization from external entities, right-wing participants discussed internal violence between members as contributing to perceptions of distrust. Such a comparison hints at the organizational dynamics (e.g., leadership style and power, collaborative barriers) associated with most collectives as well as ideological differences that exist between left-wing organizations who traditionally condemn violent action and right-wing groups who often celebrate hyper-masculinity and outgroup dehumanization.

Before turning to the contributions flowing from these results, several limitations of this study are important to bear in mind. First, the retrospective nature of the life history interviews raises questions about validity and reliability due to memory erosion, distortion, and selective recall.<sup>92</sup> The practice of remembering is a reconstructive process where memories of events are typically reinterpreted during each recall.<sup>93</sup> Despite these concerns, the rich life history accounts provide important insight from the participants' perspective. Second, due

to the relatively hidden nature of this population, the sample was derived through snowball techniques and, as a result, is not representative which prevents generalizing from these findings. The goal of the current study, however, is to develop a conceptual explanation that closely fits the data (or incidents), which the concepts are intended to represent. Although findings from the current study are not intended to provide generalizations, the hypotheses developed can be tested at a later point in future studies. Finally, it is important to point out two limitations of the sample. First, the sample is small and unrepresentative of both left-wing and right-wing organizations. Second, because the current study lacks a control group, we are unable to suggest that distrust shares a causal relationship with disengagement. In spite of these limitations, interviewing former extremists provides researchers the ability to elicit information on highly sensitive issues such as previous involvement in violence, crime, and substance abuse as well as a providing a glimpse into the interpretative processes these individuals use to make sense of their extremist careers.

Despite these limitations, there are at least four important contributions from the current effort. First, we addressed a gap in the current terrorism literature by utilizing a systematic coding scheme derived from Mayer and colleagues' integrative model of organizational trust to examine the manner in which distrust applies to extremist disengagement processes.<sup>94</sup> While scholarship on disengagement has advanced in recent years, the varied explanations are less developed regarding the complex interactional process by which structural, emotional, and cognitive factors interact as part of an individual's decision to exit from extremist participation. The benefit of organizational psychology is the ability to focus on how people cognitively and emotionally express themselves when engaging in an organizational role.<sup>95</sup> Since disengagement has been found to be influenced by individuals' cognitive and emotional state,<sup>96</sup> the current investigation provides useful information for understanding of the psychological antecedents of organizational exit.

Second, these results further terrorism research by providing a comparative analysis that offers insight into disengagement processes across ideological domains. Such a comparison informs our conceptualization of what makes extremists similar in terms of organizational grievances (e.g., poor leadership, hypocrisy) and highlights a variety of behavioral patterns involved in extremist disengagement.<sup>97</sup> This study advances our understanding of the relative importance of distrust in generating feelings of disillusionment associated with extremist activities. Moving forward, terrorism scholarship should conduct more cross-case comparison studies between different ideological groups to expand empirical observations and strengthen theoretical conclusions. Conducting more comparison studies allows researchers to distinguish patterns from anomalies, identify methodological and historical trends as well as inconsistencies between empirical studies (e.g., survey reports, ethnographies) and official police reports. Moreover, while we were primarily concerned with how distrust generates disillusionment, distrust is not the only source of disillusionment nor is disillusionment the only source of disengagement. Future research should examine other factors that contribute to both disillusionment and disengagement such as ideological contradictions.

Third, we add a level refinement to Rusbult and colleagues' investment model by specifying how individuals evaluate their level of satisfaction and organizational commitments. For instance, once participants came to view the group as distrustful they created distance between themselves and their organization. Once away, these individuals were able to reflect and evaluate their level of satisfaction, availability of alternatives, and investments.<sup>98</sup> Having said that, however, it is possible for someone to experience distrust and not leave because he

and/or she felt their expended investments were too high to justify disengagement. Moreover, it is also possible for someone to experience distrust and overlook sunk costs (e.g., money, time) associated with extremist participation but not disengage because he and/or she lacked accessibility to alternative ventures. With that said, while distrust can help explain certain pushes away from extremist involvement, distrust is not necessarily tied to all push and/or pull related factors. Furthermore, it is possible for a violent extremist to experience high levels of distrust and never disengage because of their expended investments and poor availability of alternatives.

Finally, our results highlight important implications for practitioners. Specifically, findings from the current study can inform counterterrorism measures. For instance, one way to create barriers to collaboration is to erode perceptions of each other's ability, benevolence, and/or integrity. From this perspective, distrust among extremists can lead to fissures that cause decreased decision making, splintering, and organizational demise. Thus, strategies should prioritize these goals to accelerate fissures to collaboration between leadership and rank-n-file members. This approach may be particularly effective for groups with a diverse membership (e.g., Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or the Islamic State) in conditions of external pressure and competition since this diversity relies on effective communication and decision making for organizational collaboration.

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## Appendix

### *Distrust Coding Scheme*

Distrust variables	
Low ability	Low ability refers to an inadequate or weak set of skills, competencies, and characteristics that hinder organizational influence and goal attainment. Participants may describe perceptions of poor planning or coordination, indecisive action, and ineptness as well as weak or absent leadership. For instance, these situations may involve the inability to organize events or carry out extremist actions or the failure to attract supporters to the organization.
Low integrity	Low integrity refers to a set of organizational values and actions that members found unfair, fraudulent, or hypocritical. In these situations, participants may describe the movement's actions or its members as corrupt, morally inconsistent, superficial, or shallow. For example, organizations or members characterized as having low integrity may appear two-faced or possess double-standards (e.g., speak against drug use but consume illicit drugs when alone).
Low benevolence	Low benevolence refers to the extent to which the organization, leadership, or members, work against the best interests of those in the group. Participants may describe the members of the movement as self-serving, egocentric, self-involved, merciless, harsh, inconsiderate, or uncaring. In these cases, the individual is a means to an end. As such, the organization may endanger their members' safety, well-being, and prospects to further the group's ideological mission.