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## **The Role of Disorganized Attachment in Extremist Organizations**

At a recent meeting of the EU's Radicalization Awareness Network<sup>1</sup> many speakers converged on an interesting and welcome message stating that establishing safety, building trust, and acting with kindness towards convicted violent extremists are crucial elements in helping such persons move away from extremist actions and beliefs. These speakers included prison and probation workers, social workers and psychologists involved in exit programs, as well as former extremists engaged in exit work.

This view is a long way from the largely punitive approach that continues to be applied in many cases. But this development – though it may sound 'soft' – is founded in evidence-based and scientific thinking. This thinking coincides with my own work using an attachment theory analysis to understand the dynamics of certain elements of extremism. My study does not cover all types of extremism, but is specifically relevant to those who have been radicalized by a radicalizing agent or recruiter acting for a totalitarian organization. There may be other types of violent extremism, such as true lone wolf operators, but those types are not covered in this discussion.

In this article, I describe the common features of totalitarian – or totalist – groups, and discuss how the manipulation of attachment relationships drives the hyper credulity and uncritical obedience<sup>2</sup> of followers and how understanding this can help guide our prevention and intervention efforts.

### **Characteristics of Totalitarian Groups**

I use a five point model to define a totalitarian group, based on the work of political theorist Hannah Arendt, psychohistorian Robert Jay Lifton, and psychiatrist and originator of attachment theory, John Bowlby.<sup>3</sup> These points cover the leadership, structure, ideology, process and outcomes of such groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Radicalization Awareness Network. 2018. 'The Challenge of Resocialisation: Dealing with Radicalised Individuals During and after Imprisonment.' Vienna.

<sup>2</sup> Zablocki, Benjamin D. 2001. 'Toward a Demystified and Disinterested Scientific Concept of Brainwashing.' in *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field*, edited by Benjamin D. Zablocki

<sup>3</sup> Arendt, Hannah. 1948. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, Lifton, Robert Jay. 1961. *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*. New York: The Norton Library, Bowlby, John. 1973. *Attachment and Loss, Separation*, Vol. 2. New York: Basic Books, Bowlby, John. 1980.

Firstly, totalist, ideologically extremist groups are controlled by a charismatic and authoritarian leader (or leadership group). These top leaders fit the profile of psychopaths. Both charisma and authoritarianism are required as they are the source of the group's central organizing dynamic of 'love' (or perceived benevolence) and fear. Charisma alone is not sufficient, but when combined with authoritarianism, a highly controlling system that entraps followers can emerge.

Secondly, these leaders either establish or inherit a group and create a structure that is isolating and steeply hierarchical, where the leader has total power. Followers are socially, psychologically, and sometimes physically, isolated from the outside world. They are also isolated from fellow followers in that any doubts or critiques about the group are prohibited from being shared within the group. Finally, and also resulting from the previous two forms of isolation, followers are isolated from their own internal dialogue – the conversation within their own minds – about the group.

The third point is the totalist ideology or belief system which exists to justify and reinforce this isolation and the preeminence of the leader. The important feature of these ideologies is not so much whether they are left, right, religious or any other ideology, but it is rather the *structure* of those beliefs. That is: the ideology is total, exclusive, absolute, allowing no other thought system to intervene, and claiming to have the single truth and the answers to all possible questions for all time. The source of all these answers resides solely in the leadership. The ideology thus supports the sole point of power of the leader, at the same time as cutting off any alternative ways of thinking. Along with other means<sup>4</sup>, some methods of delivery of the belief system serve to confuse followers by either highly complex (and circular) or over-simplified types of discourse. Critical thought is reduced to "thought-stopping clichés".<sup>5</sup> The goal of the totalist ideology is in fact to impose the group's interpretation of the follower's experience so as to prevent followers from being able to think about their own feelings and experience independently.

The process that takes place within this type of organization is that of brainwashing – also known by a variety of other terms including: coercive control,

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*Attachment and Loss, Loss*, Vol. 3. New York: Basic Books, Bowlby, John. 1982. *Attachment and Loss, Attachment*, Vol. 1. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of the ideology and use of language see Stein, Alexandra. 2017. *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*. London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Lifton, Robert Jay. 1961. *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*. New York: The Norton Library.

thought reform, mind control, radicalization, grooming, and coercive persuasion. This forms the fourth point in my definition of a totalitarian group. The result of this process of psychological domination through brainwashing is a follower who can be ordered to engage in activities on behalf of the leader and group regardless of their own (their loved ones') survival interests. Judith Herman refers to this as the creation of a 'willing victim'.<sup>6</sup> This outcome is the fifth element that defines a totalitarian group.

### **How Does Attachment Work in Extremist Groups?**

Up till now much emphasis was put on extremist ideology and its attraction and motivational impact for recruits. A 'liberatory' (or other) ideology may well be part of the initial appeal (although it is not always, as, for example, for those born into totalitarian settings). But retaining followers within an organization that is clearly not serving their interests, and is in fact personally oppressive, requires more than an ideological appeal. Some recruits may demonstrate little or even no understanding of the particular ideology of their group. Beyond simply looking at the ideology, we must also understand the role of personal relationships and networks and how they are manipulated within the totalist structure to recruit and retain followers.

There are many varied pathways into violent extremism.<sup>7</sup> Martha Crenshaw states most people join terrorist groups by "accident, on their way to other goals."<sup>8</sup> However, beyond the initial recruitment phase, the development of an ongoing bond with a totalist group and the resulting creation of a deployable follower takes a predictable form. Put simply, the process involves isolating the target, engulfing them within the totalitarian group structure and beliefs, establishing the group and its leader as the only perceived safe haven, and then arousing chronic levels of stress and fear. This creates a fear-based bond between follower and group, and can also result in a state of traumatic dissociation whereby the follower can no longer think about or trust their own feelings and experience.

This process can be usefully explained using attachment theory. Attachment theory was developed by John Bowlby whose work was based in evolutionary theory<sup>9</sup>. Many thousands of studies across a range of social relationships have

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<sup>6</sup> Herman, Judith. 1992. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>7</sup> Travis, Alan. 2008. 'Mi5 Report Challenges Views on Terrorism in Britain Exclusive: Sophisticated Analysis Says There Is No Single Pathway to Violent Extremism.' in *The Guardian*. London.

<sup>8</sup> Crenshaw, Martha. 2011. 'Radicalization and Recruitment into Terrorism.' Paper presented at the Processes of Radicalization and De-Radicalization, April, Bielefeld, Germany.

<sup>9</sup> Bowlby, John. 1982. *Attachment and Loss, Attachment*, Vol. 1. New York: Basic Books.

been done based on his foundational and groundbreaking work providing a rich evidence base.<sup>10</sup>

The process of brainwashing that totalist systems engage in is one of psychological, coercive manipulation where the leader or group alternates terror with 'love'. Bowlby states that when we are frightened, we don't simply run away from the fear, but run to a safe haven, 'to someone...' – and that someone is usually a person to whom we feel attached. But when the supposed safe haven is *also* the source of the fear, then running to that person is a failing strategy, causing the frightened person to freeze, trapped between approach and avoidance.

Bowlby states that this "running to" is an evolutionary adaptation fundamental to humans; the drive to seek proximity to a safe other in order to gain protection from threat improves chances of survival (initially as infants to caregivers, but ongoing throughout life). The origins of Bowlby's theory developed through his observations of children under stress and deprivation.<sup>11</sup> A brief explanation follows.

A child seeks its parent when ill, tired, frightened or in any other way under threat. The parent then functions as a safe haven – a source of protection and comfort. But, once comforted, the child eventually wishes to explore its world again, and now the parent functions as a secure base from which the child ventures out to explore the world and to which it can return when protection and comfort is again needed. Secure attachment is the optimal form of attachment, and is open, flexible and responsive. Similar dynamics occur in adults in their relationships with spouses, partners or very close friends.

There is a biochemical aspect to this. When we explore our worlds we experience a certain amount of stimulation and excitement – physiologically the level of the cortisol hormone in our bodies rises. But too much stimulation – which can become stress or threat: fatigue, hunger, or fear, for example – means our level of cortisol rises beyond a manageable threshold. In persons with more or less secure attachment this is a signal to seek a safe haven (even if symbolically, or internally) to help calm this rise in cortisol. The caregiver can then act as a safe haven helping to calm the stressed individual. In doing

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<sup>10</sup> Cassidy, J. and P. Shaver, eds. 2016. *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research and Clinical Applications*. New York: Guildford Press.

<sup>11</sup> Bowlby, John. 1944. 'Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves.' *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 25(19):1.

so the individual's endogenous (internal) opioids rise and the level of excitatory cortisol is reduced.

But after an individual's opioid levels rise to a sufficient level we can say that their attachment needs have been terminated. They can now move away from the attachment figure and explore, knowing the attachment figure is available should they be needed again. This is normally a homeostatic system, ebbing and flowing between these two states of arousal and comfort in a flexible, balanced manner.

But attachment relationships do not always function well. In particular, when the caregiver is not only the source of potential comfort but is *also* the source of threat, a relationship of *disorganised attachment*<sup>12</sup> results. We might see this in a child's relationship with a frightening parent, or in a violent or abusive adult relationship. When the perceived safe haven is also the source of threat, the stressed or frightened person will attempt to seek out their attachment figure. But seeking comfort from the source of fear not only brings the individual closer to the source of fear, it also fails to produce comfort, thus impeding the cycle of renewed exploration. In attachment terms we can say that the attempt to approach the comfort of the safe haven is in opposition to the need to escape from the threat.

*If the person has no other available attachments to turn to* (and this is key), their attachment behaviour is never terminated – the person never gets enough opioids to manage the cortisol levels, and thus stays in an anxiously aroused and fearful state. The person will not be able to use the attachment figure as a secure base from which to move away and explore their environment. If another safe attachment was available they might be able to escape this disorganized attachment trap and find comfort elsewhere.

The closed, isolating and fearful world within a totalitarian group is designed to promote a relationship of disorganised attachment to the leader or the group: a combination of terror and supposed 'love', or benevolence, that is used to emotionally trap and cognitively disable followers. This is not to say that the follower has a pre-existing disorganized attachment – in fact, I believe *persons of any prior attachment status* are vulnerable to recruitment and re-

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<sup>12</sup> Main, Mary and Judith Solomon. 1986. 'Discovery of an Insecure-Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment Pattern.' in *Affective Development in Infancy*, edited by T. B. Brazelton and M. W. Yogman. Nowood, NJ:

tention within a totalitarian group. It is to say, rather, that the group *deliberately creates a disorganized bond between itself and the follower*, through what Margaret Singer refers to as a “coordinated program of persuasion”.<sup>13</sup>

Disorganised attachment is fear-based and has both emotional and cognitive effects: a confused emotional bonding to the source of fear in a failed attempt to seek comfort as described above, and a resulting cognitive dissociation, that is, the inability to think about one’s feelings. Fear or stress without escape – “fright without solution”<sup>14</sup>, as attachment researchers refer to it – is a traumatic ‘freeze’ state that derails a person’s ability to think logically and clearly about the situation and therefore to take action to resolve it. Trauma researchers have shown that higher level cognitive functions – our language and logic-based thinking – are disrupted in conditions of trauma.<sup>15</sup> In the long-term relational trauma of disorganized attachment this can therefore disrupt clear thinking about what is happening in one’s environment, and the ability to make plans for one’s own survival can be disrupted over long periods of time. Lack of sleep, time, and access to information, along with the group’s fictitious explanation for what the follower is experiencing, adds to this deficit in thinking clearly about one’s own situation.

This creation of a tightly bonded, dissociated follower is only possible if the follower is isolated from alternate trusting relationships. For this reason, we can predict that cultic systems will attempt to interfere with and control any alternative attachment relationships a person might have. To fail to do so would allow the follower to find a safe haven elsewhere and potentially escape the emotional and cognitive control of the group. The same phenomenon occurs in cases of controlling domestic violence, of the Stockholm Syndrome or, frequently, with pimps and prostitutes, as well as in human trafficking.

Thus we have, in members of totalitarian groups, people who have a fear-based bond to the group, and a cognitive deficit in terms of thinking about that relationship and their own situation in relation to it.

These processes of isolation from former friends and family, engulfment, establishing the group as the sole perceived safe haven and eliciting chronic stress and fear, may also exist in many right-wing extremist groups along with

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<sup>13</sup> Singer, M.T. and J. Lalich. 1995. *Cults in Our Midst: The Hidden Menace in Our Everyday Lives*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

<sup>14</sup> Hesse, E. and M. Main. 2006. ‘Frightened, Threatening, and Dissociative Parental Behavior in Low-Risk Samples: Description, Discussion, and Interpretations.’ *Development and Psychopathology* 18(02):309-43.

<sup>15</sup> Schore, Allan N. 2009. ‘Attachment Trauma and the Developing Right Brain: Origins of Pathological Dissociation.’ *Dissociation and the Dissociative Disorders: DSM-V and Beyond*: 107-41.

other politically based extremist groups. There may be many reasons and pathways for people joining right-wing groups, but the disorganized bond that forms within tightly knit, closed groups seem to be key in retaining them over time. A former member of a Scandinavian far right group described to me the immense difficulty of leaving his group as he had become completely isolated from any supportive attachments outside of the group.<sup>16</sup> Ivan Humble, a former member of the British far right group, EDL, reported how the group became his social life to the extent that he neglected even his attachment to his children.<sup>17</sup> Angela King, a former right-wing extremist described the violent repercussions of trying to leave.<sup>18</sup> The threatened violence reinforces the message in a literal manner – there is no life for you outside of the group. If the threats fail to keep the follower in, then shunning follows.

The fear element of this process includes the ideological component of the threat of whatever 'outgroup' serves the group's agenda at a given time, as well as accusations about the follower's own shortcomings. Other testimonies from former right-wing followers describe social and psychological isolation and close control of personal relationships, along with constant fear messages delivered by the leadership.<sup>19</sup> Those with expertise in the field of right-wing extremism will have their own data showing which groups use this type of process to retain and control followers (not all do).

### **Intervention and Prevention**

Leaving such groups often occurs when a follower is able to make a personal connection outside of the group, whether through a romantic relationship, a friendship outside of the group (and sometimes even a trusted friendship inside the group), concern for their children, or even through contacts made in prison. Simply being in prison or in the hospital, or otherwise away from the influence of the group, can provide a pathway out, especially if this happens along with the formation or renewal of alternative attachments. Cognitive processes alone – where over time the isolated follower begins to see through

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<sup>16</sup> Personal communication

<sup>17</sup> Ward, Simon. 2017. "'The Edl Took over My Life': Lowestoft Man Reveals How Facebook Post Led to Him Joining Far Right Protest Group.' in *Lowestoft Journal*. Lowestoft. and for other examples regarding parents, see also Stein, Alexandra. 1997. 'Mothers in Cults: The Influence of Cults on the Relationship of Mothers to Their Children.' *Cultic Studies Journal* 14(1):40-57.

<sup>18</sup> Helfand-Rogers, Candace. 2017. 'Providing a Way Forward from Hate.' Retrieved 31 January 2019 (<https://thestoryexchange.org/providing-a-way-forward-from-hate/>).

<sup>19</sup> Stein, Alexandra. 2017. *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*. London and New York: Routledge.

the indoctrination messages – may also be a way out, though it is less common.

Exit work based on a bounded, supportive approach that considers followers as victims of a form of relational trauma follows this analysis. This leads us back to the starting point of this article and the importance of exit workers developing trusting and kind relationships with the people they work with. A strictly punitive approach – though it can sometimes be helpful insofar as it removes the follower from the controlling sphere of influence of the group – may only serve to further isolate the person and shut down their thinking. But creating a sense of physical, emotional and social safety can allow the follower – on a physiological level – to calm the chronic cortisol arousal resulting from the disorganized relationship to the group. If this is achieved it may then be possible for the follower to begin thinking more clearly about the relationship and to reintegrate previously dissociated thought processes.

After establishing safety, information about the group that the follower may not have been aware of can then be introduced. At some point, information about the processes of coercive control, brainwashing or grooming can also be offered as a way to explain what has happened to the follower. Of course, the timing of these interventions is a subtle and individual process requiring trained and sensitive practitioners. Hearing about the experiences of former extremists from other groups can help those exiting see the common dynamics of manipulation. These steps would go along with ongoing practical efforts at reintegration including supporting education, employment, housing and so on (all of which contribute to establishing safety).

It is critical to take a broad, public health approach to begin to educate the population about these mechanisms of control. Prevention should ideally reach people before they experience a recruitment attempt. As the social psychologist Solomon Asch puts it:

The greater man's ignorance of the principles of his social surroundings, the more subject is he to their control; and the greater his knowledge of their operations and of their necessary consequences, the freer he can become with regard to them.<sup>20</sup>

Prevention requires teaching people, in an ideologically neutral way, specifically about the methods and structures of totalist groups and relationships.

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<sup>20</sup> Asch, Solomon E. 1952. *Social Psychology*. New York: Prentice-Hall.



This would teach people to recognize not just recruitment to extremism, but other dangerous relationships such as domestic abuse, bullying and so forth.

Totalitarian leaders are perpetrators who use isolating, engulfing and fear-based methods to entrap people within their organizations in order to subjugate them and deploy them for their own purposes and benefit. It is therefore contingent upon democratic societies to criminalise these processes. Persons directing such processes would then be subject to criminal sanctions – regardless of ideology or whether the leaders were directly culpable of violent crimes. If effectively implemented such laws could allow earlier intervention to prevent attempts to radicalise followers. If focused on repeated “patterns of controlling or coercive behaviours”<sup>21</sup> intended to subjugate followers, then such a law would not breach freedom of speech, nor of association. Clearly defined laws that spell out these processes of control can resolve the false dichotomy between violent and non-violent extremism and the pitfalls of focusing solely on ideology that can currently confuse thinking in this field. Such a law would target totalitarian leaders and their top lieutenants.

## Conclusion

The type of control discussed in this essay does not cover all types of violent extremism or right wing extremism. It focuses on that which occurs within totalitarian organizations where the goal is to create hyper credulous and uncritically obedient<sup>22</sup> deployable followers who are unable to advocate for their own – or their loved ones’ – survival interests. Understanding the fundamental processes of this type of radicalization is key to further developing prevention efforts, and can contribute to helping those within these systems to exit and recover.

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<sup>21</sup> This quote is from a progressive 2015 law in the UK that, unfortunately, is restricted to “intimate and family relationships”. However, it describes behaviours that should also be applied to groups and would do well to be extended to those. See Home Office. 2015. *Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship Statutory Guidance Framework* Congress, ([https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/482528/Controlling\\_or\\_coercive\\_behaviour\\_-\\_statutory\\_guidance.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/482528/Controlling_or_coercive_behaviour_-_statutory_guidance.pdf)).

<sup>22</sup> Zablocki, Benjamin D. 2001. ‘Toward a Demystified and Disinterested Scientific Concept of Brainwashing.’ in *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field*, edited by Benjamin D. Zablocki