

Title

Extreme Disconnect: Extremism-Social Connectedness Continuum Theory.

Abstract

This paper introduces the *Extremism-Social Connectedness Continuum Theory*, which conceptualizes extremism as a motivational imbalance arising from disruptions in social interdependence. Building on Kruglanski et al.'s (2021) model of goal fixation, we propose that social connectedness and extremism operate in reciprocal tension: social relationships require time, energy, and adherence to shared norms, while extremism demands singular devotion to one overriding goal. As individuals become more extreme, they prune social ties that do not serve that goal, eroding the normative feedback that ordinarily regulates behavior. Conversely, strong, norm-enforcing connections constrain extremist cognition and action. Empirically, across diverse samples, alienation correlates positively with radical intentions, while activism (less extreme intentions) does not correlate with alienation, supporting the theory's predictions. The causality of this relationship seems bidirectional. Experimental studies reveal that social exclusion or rejection increases extremism. At the same time, personality measures of extremism correlate with low agreeableness and the Dark Triad; and studies report that both terrorists and extreme conspiracists progressively alienate from family and friends as their extremism grows—suggesting that extremism leads to isolation because it strains relationships. Integrating motivational, evolutionary, and communitarian perspectives, the framework situates extremism along a continuum from socially embedded to socially detached states. We conclude that interventions fostering belonging, mentorship, and moral community may effectively mitigate extremist trajectories by restoring social interdependence.