Victimization and Violent Extremism

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Project Description

Victimization as a Pathway to Violent Extremism

Violent extremism is a complex, global problem that is beginning to receive increased attention in the social sciences (Borum, 2011; Horgan, 2009; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Sageman, 2004; Simi & Futrell, 2010; Turk, 2004; Webb, 2002). Violent extremism is defined as violence committed by an individual and/or group in support of a specific religious or political ideology and the term is typically equated with terrorism (Borum, 2011). Traditionally, the presence of ideological motivations has encouraged criminologists to endorse the belief that violent extremism is an exclusive phenomenon and outside the explanatory scope of traditional criminological theories (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2001; Mullins, 2009). Recent studies, however, suggest that this trend is beginning to change as more criminological theories such as life course theory (Simi, Sporer, & Bubolz, 2016), subcultural theory (Pisoiu, 2015), rational choice (Perry & Hasisi, 2015), displacement and diffusion (Hsu & Apel, 2015), social disorganization (Fahey & LaFree, 2015), routine activities (Parkin & Freilich, 2015), and deterrence (Argomaniz & Vidai-Diez, 2015) have been applied to violent extremism. Many of these studies are a part of a growing body of literature seeking to neutralize extremist violence by understanding what is known as radicalization into violent extremism. For the purposes of this paper, radicalization is defined as the result of a dialectical progression that gradually pushes an individual towards a commitment to violence (McCormick, 2003). This definition is in line with the existing literature on radicalization and reflects the notion that there is more practicality in examining violent extremism as a dynamic process rather than a “one size fits all” condition (Borum, 2011).

Studies considering the different pathways into violent extremism indicate that certain catalysis events or mechanisms serve as a tipping point in the radicalization process (Schafer, Mullins, & Box, 2014). While no universal catalysis exists, the majority of research on violent extremism has focused on the role of ideology in the radicalization process (Post, 2005). As such, there is very little information about the effects of non-ideological motivations except for a few highly conceptual works (Crenshaw, 2000; Horgan, 2009; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Sageman, 2004; Stern, 2004). From a criminological approach, perhaps one of the most fruitful ideas is that victimization serves as a non-ideological mechanism (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). The problem is that past studies define victimization as it relates to larger societal, political, or religious grievances, which is much different from traditional definitions presented in the field of criminology (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby, & Kracke, 2009). More recently, a forthcoming article by Simi, Sporer, and Bubolz (2016) provides a closer analysis on effects of interpersonal victimization on radicalization from a criminological viewpoint. In their study, Simi and colleagues (2016) discover that different forms of childhood trauma, specifically physical and sexual victimization, act as catalysis events in the radicalization process. In the current study, I intend to build on these findings and emphasize the effects of interpersonal victimization on radicalization across the life course (e.g., childhood, adolescence, adulthood).

In regards to the theoretical framework, this study utilizes general strain theory to examine the relationship between victimization and radicalization. Developed by Robert Agnew (1992), general strain theory is one of the most prominent and widely used criminological theories. According to Agnew (1992), criminality is the consequence of stress or strain that results from unfavorable social relationships which prevent the achievement of goals, remove positive stimuli, or present negative stimuli. These unfavorable relationships increase negative emotions such as anger and frustration, and create pressure for corrective actions. Criminal behavior is one possible corrective action because certain actions can reduce strain (e.g., stealing money) or relieve negative emotions (e.g., drug use) (Agnew, 1992). In a revised version, Agnew (2001) argues that strains that are seen as unjust, seen as high in magnitude, associated with low social control, or create some pressure to engage in criminal coping are most likely to lead to criminal behaviors (p. 319). Agnew (2001) specifically notes that victimization is a form of strain most likely to lead to crime because it is viewed as universally unjust and high in magnitude. Agnew (2001) also notes that there are subjective or contextual influences that condition the impact of various strains. For this study, these contextual factors are especially important because research has shown that variations in the likelihood and impact of victimization are associated with factors unique to different life course phases (Berg & Loeber, 2011; Brezina, 2000; Fagan & Mazzerolle, 2011; Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009; Hay & Evans, 2006; Knickerbocker, Heyman, Slep, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2007; Lauritsen, 2001; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2008).
In conclusion, the proposed research examines victimization as a mechanism within the radicalization process into violent extremism. Using general strain theory, I suggest that victimization acts as a radicalization mechanism because it results in a high degree of negative emotionality and pressure to use corrective actions. However, the exact degree to which exposure to victimization impacts an individual is reliant on when the incident occurred within a person’s life course. My general expectation is that victimization leads to radicalization through one of two multidimensional pathways. In pathway one, victimization leads to increased negative emotions in the form of anger or aggression. These negative emotions then spiral into conduct issues and delinquency, which increases one's exposure to extremist networks and extremist group contact. Pathway one is an indirect pathway in which victimization is more likely to occur in childhood. In pathway two, victimization increases the vulnerability of radicalizing in extremism because extremist groups are viewed as an attractive alternative to the victim’s current lifestyle. For example, a person who has been chronically victimized or experienced acute victimization during adolescence (e.g., extreme bullying at school or in neighborhood) may view extremism as a “safe haven” away from the potential for additional victimization. Pathway two involves a direct relationship where victimization directly results in VE involvement.

**The Product of the Funded Activity and Its Contribution to my Doctoral Studies**

This research project will be used to achieve three goals related to the development of my academic career. My first goal is to present this project at the annual American Society of Criminology (ASC) conference in November 2016. This is a national-level conference and presenting this project will provide an opportunity to network and receive feedback with other academics and practitioners as well as positively represent the University of Nebraska, Omaha. My second goal is to submit this project to one or more peer-review journals in the fields of criminology, criminal justice, social psychology, or sociology. If accepted and published, this project would represent an important stepping-stone in the advancement of my academic career, which will ultimately help me in future job searches. Finally, I intend on utilizing this project towards the development of my dissertation. As a first-year Ph.D. student, completing this project would provide me with a head start and foundation on which I can build a theoretically-informed and well-designed dissertation project.

**Contribution to the Field**

The findings from this study will contribute to the field of criminology in two unique ways. First, this study will expand on the relatively new relationship between the fields of criminology and violent extremism by applying general strain theory to radicalization. To date, general strain theory has rarely been applied to violent extremism (see Blazak, 2001 for exception). According to Rice (2009), general strain theory has received limited attention because past studies have neglected the influence of emotions in favor of sociopolitical concerns. However, as the impact of emotionality is resurfacing in the literature, Rice (2009) recommends that researchers should consider employing the principles of general strain theory to the etiology of violent extremism. Following these recommendations, the current study emphasizes the influence of emotions caused by strain as a risk factor towards radicalization into violent extremism.

The second way this study contributes to the field of criminology is by exploring victimization as a mechanism related to radicalization. As previously noted, several scholars have cited concepts related to victimization as a risk factor to violent extremism. However, McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) are of the first to suggest personal victimization as a radicalization pathway. Despite leaving room for conceptual and theoretical clarification, the authors contend that personal victimization is one of twelve overall risk factors, and one of five individual-level risk factors, as a trajectory towards violent extremism. Agnew (2001) also argues that victimization is one of the strains most likely to lead to criminal or illegitimate coping strategies because they are high in magnitude and viewed as unjust. Overall, I propose a similar line of think using a two-pathway approach in which victimization acts as a catalyst (Gill, 2007) towards the onset of negative emotions or a cognitive opening (Wiktorowicz, 2004) for radicalization.
Methodology and Other Activities

To assess the impact of victimization on radicalization into violent extremism, the current project relies on in-depth life history data collected from a sample (N = 44) of former right-wing extremists. Right-wing extremism is a substantial component of the larger violent extremism problem due to increases in membership (Potok, 2012) and acts of violence (Piazza, 2015) within North America and Europe. Right-wing extremist groups typically include white supremacist, neo-Nazi, and anti-government groups in which are loosely bound together by shared grievances, a propensity toward violent action, and a common ideological rhetoric (Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006; Simi, 2010; Simi & Futrell, 2010). For this study, subjects were recruited using a non-probability sampling technique referred to as snowball sampling. Afterwards, semi-structured interviews were utilized to collect in-depth life history data. The major benefit of using semi-structured interviews is that they are highly flexible and allow the interviewer to gauge each subject’s attitude and respond accordingly (Fontana & Frey, 2000). My faculty mentor for this project, Dr. Pete Simi, is highly proficient in the use of semi-structured interviewing as well as other qualitative research techniques. To date, Dr. Simi has conducted over 200 interviews with former and current members of extremist groups and street gangs. Dr. Simi has granted me access to a total of 44 interviews with former right-wing extremists for this study.

The interviews are transcribed and archived in a centralized dataset containing several thousand pages of Microsoft Word documents. The dataset contains initial and follow-up interviews ranging from three hours to several days. Each interview contains a variety of information about the participant including their background, entry process, and involvement in extremist activities, and their disengagement from extremism. While the wealth of information contained in the interviews is important, this project will solely focus on the participants’ lives prior to their involvement in right-wing extremism. Using a modified grounded theory approach, I plan to conduct line-line coding of the transcripts to identify themes related to direct personal victimization that may have influenced the subjects’ subsequent life choices (i.e., entering extremism) as well as create frequency distributions that highlight the different types of victimization (e.g., physical, sexual, etc.) that were most commonly reported.

The primary limitation of the current method is the lack of randomization and small sample size. Taken together, these limitations affect the degree in which the results are generalizable to the larger population. The semi-structured interviews, however, combat these limitations by providing rich information that is generally unavailable through the use of other methodologies.

Projected Timeline

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<th>2016-2017 Projected Timeline</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>May 2016</strong></td>
<td>Complete the literature review and theoretical framework chapters of this project. Begin the qualitative analysis.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>June and July 2016</strong></td>
<td>Complete the qualitative analysis including opening coding to identify different themes within the transcripts. Begin to write the results section. Make necessary revisions as required.</td>
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<td><strong>August 2016</strong></td>
<td>Complete the results and conclusions sections.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fall Semester 2016</strong></td>
<td>Draft manuscript will be presented at the 2016 American Society of Criminology conference (ASC) in New Orleans, LA. Incorporate feedback from the ASC conference.</td>
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<td><strong>Spring Semester 2017</strong></td>
<td>Project will be presented at the 2017 Student Research and Creative Activity Fair (RCAF). Submit the finished project to peer-reviewed journal.</td>
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The Role of the Student and Faculty Mentor

Together, my faculty mentor, Dr. Pete Simi, and I have worked on the development of this research project and discussed its potential contribution to the field of criminology and criminal justice. Dr. Simi has already supplied me with the interview transcripts for this project. Therefore, as the primary investigator, I will be responsible for the following tasks: open-coding interview transcripts, using a ground theory approach to identify potential themes and subthemes, and writing up the methodology, theoretical framework, and results of this project. As my faculty mentor, Dr. Pete Simi, will primarily be assisting me with the coding and writing process as needed. More importantly, Dr. Simi will also be available for consultation and guidance through the entirety of the project.
Budget Justifications

Funds will be used for living expenses over the summer semester. More importantly, however, funding will also allow me to begin drafting papers to be submitted to peer-reviewed journals as well as laying the groundwork for my dissertation. As a funded doctoral student, I am extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to receive financial compensation in the fall and spring semesters. My current graduate stipend, however, does not cover the summer semester, so this funding would provide financial assistance as I worked on this project over the summer months. Based on discussions with my faculty mentor, I expect that a majority of my time will be spent coding and interpreting the data. From my own personal experience, I also anticipate that writing the front-end (literature review and theoretical framework) and results will constitute a substantial portion of the time needed to complete this project. Therefore, I plan to work 40 hours per week and dedicate my full attention to this project over the entire summer in order to accomplish the goals listed on my projected timeline.

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<th>Proposed Budget</th>
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<tr>
<td>Summer Stipend for Daily Living Expenses and Additional Costs</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<th>Proposed Summer Time Investment (May 1st- Aug 22nd)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Writing Literature Review and Methodology Sections</td>
<td>May 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Open-Coding and Developing Themes</td>
<td>June and July 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Results</td>
<td>Aug 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>General Editing and Revising</td>
<td>As Needed</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>~16 Weeks</td>
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References


Letter of Mentor Support

To Whom It May Concern,

I am pleased to write in support of Michael Logan’s GRACA application to the Office of Graduate Studies at the University of Nebraska Omaha. Michael is a first-year doctoral student and has been working under my supervision as part of his graduate assistantship during this past semester. Since his arrival in our program this fall, I have met with Michael on a regular basis to discuss project-related tasks as well as broader issues related such as research methodology and criminological and social theory. As such, I am well positioned to evaluate Michael’s GRACA application.

Broadly speaking, Michael is interested in violence, victimization, criminological theory, and extremism. Michael’s GRACA proposal involves examining whether personal victimization plays a role in the entry process related to violent extremism. The radicalization process has received substantial attention over the past two decades, and, as current events attest, such as the Paris and San Bernardino attacks, this issue will be a research topic that receives even greater attention. To date, however, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been devoted to studying the role of personal victimization (as opposed to collective victimization) as a catalyst for involvement in violent extremism. Michael’s project will focus on examining multiple pathways that involve personal victimization and the different ways these experiences may inform the development of violent extremism. As part of Michael’s project, he will rely on the substantial existing literature within criminology regarding personal victimization as it relates to generic criminality. In addition, his project will be guided by general strain theory which will be used to ground his empirical analysis of the life histories of former violent extremists.

Michael’s focus on personal victimization is likely to yield substantial practical implications in terms of programmatic interventions aimed at preventing and deterring radicalization. Michael’s project relies on in-depth empirical data derived from life history interviews that I have conducted over the past three years and will continue conducting over the next several years as part of projects funded by the Department of Justice.

During Michael’s first semester, he played an important role in the completion of a final report submitted to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Michael demonstrated substantial initiative and proved to be a quick learner. Because of his work as a graduate assistant on the DHS project, he is very familiar with the interview data I have been collecting and has been developing his own unique research questions such as those related to personal victimization. I expect the victimization project will inform Michael’s research agenda throughout his time in our doctoral program and as he moves into his first academic position.

Michael’s proposal is also closely connected to a growing body of research at UNO related to international and domestic terrorism conducted in partnership with various federal agencies including the NU system’s collaboration with the Department of Defense under the auspices of the National Strategic Research Initiative. Michael will be working with individuals across campus who specialize in this area of research. In particular, Michael will be involved with the interdisciplinary Center for Collaboration Sciences and benefit from working with faculty from a variety of different backgrounds with a variety of different skill-sets.

In terms of tangible scholarly products, I expect Michael’s project will result in several publications and will likely provide the basis for his dissertation project. Michael understands the importance of working long hours which he recognizes is necessary to bring his research plans to fruition. In addition, these funds will be vital to helping Michael focus on his first major academic conference presentation and peer-reviewed manuscript submission. As you know, both of these are vital to the development of a successful doctoral student. In conclusion, I strongly encourage the committee to support Michael’s research plans and have absolutely no doubt that his efforts over this coming summer will become part of his larger research portfolio. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Pete Simi, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
University of Nebraska Omaha