

Aggressive Radicalism as a Response to Self-Uncertainty

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Uncertainty-identity theory (e.g., Hogg, 2007, in press) argues that feelings of uncertainty, particular about or related to one's identity and sense of self, motivate uncertainty reduction; that group identification through self-categorization is an effective way to reduce this form of uncertainty; and that more entitative groups are better equipped than less entitative groups to reduce self-related uncertainty. Studies have provided support for this analysis.

In more extreme or enduring contexts of uncertainty (e.g., economic crises, societal conflict, dramatic life events) where self-uncertainty is more self-consequential, extreme or chronic, people yearn to identify particularly strongly (as true believers or zealots) with groups that are highly entitative and distinctive (extreme groups with rigid boundaries, orthodox belief systems, intolerance of dissent, fear of outsiders, hierarchical authority structures, ethnocentrism and so forth). In these circumstances, however, high entitativity may not be enough; people may seek groups that are assertively action-oriented in pursuing radical agendas to promote or protect their interests and the identities of their members. These are precisely the conditions that may legitimate and encourage intergroup aggression and aggressive suppression of ingroup dissenters and deviates. Radical groups such as these may appear to offer a course of action that transforms uncertainty as a potential threat into uncertainty as a potential challenge.

To support this conceptual analysis I describe some field experiments showing a tendency for people to be less opposed to or more supportive of more assertive/aggressive intergroup behavior on the part of their ingroup when self-uncertainty was high