Finding

Belonging nowhere: Marginalization & radicalization risk among Muslim Immigrants

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Summary. In the last 15 years, the threat of Muslim violent extremists emerging within Western countries has grown. Terrorist organizations based in the Middle East are recruiting Muslims in the United States and Europe via social media. Yet we know little about the factors that would drive Muslim immigrants in a Western country to heed this call and become radicalized, even at the cost of their own lives. Research into the psychology of terrorism suggests that a person's cultural identity plays a key role in radicalization, so we surveyed 198 Muslims in the United States about their cultural identities and attitudes toward extremism. We found that immigrants who identify with neither their heritage culture nor the culture they are living in feel marginalized and insignificant. Experiences of discrimination make the situation worse and lead to greater support for radicalism, which promises a sense of meaning and life purpose. Such insights could be of use to policymakers engaged in efforts against violent extremism, including terrorism.

There is a critical need for academics and policymakers to better understand the puzzle of how and why some people turn to violent extremism. Violent extremism is not limited to actions within any single faith community. It is a broad term that applies to threats emanating from a range of organizations and movements that use violence to pursue ideological, social or political goals. White supremacist movements, anarchist militias, eco-terrorists, and Muslim militants associated with terrorist organizations such as Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS) and al-Qaeda all fall in this category.

In response to violent transnational groups' increased recruitment of Muslim immigrants in Western countries, we researched factors that could contribute to the risk of radicalization among such immigrants, a potentially vulnerable demographic. Recent events make clear that this issue is becoming increasingly important both within and outside of the United States. It is estimated that more than 5,000 recruits from Europe and the United States have gone to Syria and Iraq to fight for

Lyons-Padilla, S., Gelfand, M. J., Mirahmadi, H., Farooq, M., & van Egmond, M. (2015). Belonging nowhere: Marginalization & radicalization risk among Muslim Immigrants. *Behavioral Science & Policy, 1*(2).

groups such as ISIS, and some return to their countries radicalized and equipped to carry out attacks on or near their own soil.[1–3] Among these, apparently, was Belgian-born Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who led the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris that killed 130 people and wounded more than 350. Only a few weeks later, Syed Farook and Tashfeen Malik, an American-born citizen and a Saudi Arabian immigrant, pledged allegiance to ISIS and killed 14 people at a holiday party in San Bernardino, California. Governments around the globe need a better understanding of the root causes of such radicalization to implement successful policies to counter violent extremism (CVE), including terrorism.

While it may surprise some, evidence is strong that religion is not the primary motivator for joining violent extremists like ISIS.[4,5] In fact, research on the characteristics of violent extremists suggests that many are religious novices or converts.[6] For example, two young British men jailed in 2014 on terrorism charges had ordered *Islam for Dummies* and *The Koran for Dummies* before going to fight in Syria. Instead, religion is sometimes used to legitimize personal and collective frustrations and justify violent ideologies.

In light of the recent increase in foreign fighters for the ISIS, many of whom are first- or second-generation immigrants, more attention should be directed to immigrants' identity processes, or, in other words, how people manage their identities with their culture of origin (for example, home country or religion) and their identities with their new home country's culture. Recruiters explicitly target first- and second-generation Muslims in typically non-Muslim countries as part of their call to "embark on jihad in your own countries."[7] The vast majority of Muslim immigrants, of course, ignore the call. How can policymakers understand what draws the few immigrants who respond?

Research to date indicates that, in general, terrorists are not unusual in terms of their psychopathology or personality.[8,9] But recent studies have shown that some people who join violent extremist movements are on a quest for significance, a sense that their lives have purpose and meaning.[10,11] They want to generate this sense of worth in themselves and appear worthy in the eyes of others.[12] Personal trauma, shame, humiliation, and perceived maltreatment by society can cause people to feel a loss of self-worth, which we call *significance loss*. Individuals who have experienced such losses of significance may be attracted to opportunities to restore a sense of self-worth and clear identity.[13–17]

Recruitment material made by Qaeda and affiliates, for example, often invoke the humiliation and suffering of Muslims throughout the world, which can resonate with people who relate to a collective experience of significance loss (see reference 12). In many propaganda videos and other recruitment efforts, committing to a violent extremist organization's definition of *jihad* is presented as a route to regaining significance. Terrorist organizations, in other words, offer a sense of belonging, purpose, and the promise of recognition and status to anyone who works on their behalf.[18] This is not unlike the sense of community that street gangs promise to American youth who lack belongingness and direction in their lives.[19]

In this context, vital questions arise for policymakers aiming to prevent violent extremism. Among the most important of these questions is which populations are at greatest risk of the loss of identity, purpose, and value? Social psychology studies offer some important clues. Michael Hogg and colleagues, for instance, have observed that joining a group with a clear ideology and strong norms reduces uncertainty among group members. The distinction between "us" versus "them" that group identification provides helps people understand who they are, what they should believe, and what to expect of others outside of their group (see references 13 and 17). For example, in one study, students from Australia who were made to feel uncertain were more likely to support an extreme group on campus and demonstrate support for their radical behavior (see reference 16). Religious groups are particularly effective at offering a sense of certainty, which may explain the appeal of violent extremist organizations for some Muslim immigrants.[20]

Building on research about immigrant acculturation, we theorized that certain Muslim immigrants and minorities who feel culturally homeless and are, in effect, marginalized lack a sense of clear belonging.[21] They, in turn, may be attracted to a supportive group that affirms their sense of self-worth and offers a clear sense of identity. We propose that marginalized immigrants are at much higher risk for feeling a loss of significance and hence are more susceptible to radicalization.

We examined this proposal with a cross-sectional survey of Muslims in the United States. To our knowledge, this is one of the first empirical studies to

investigate whether and how marginalized immigrants are at risk for becoming radicalized. Our results suggest that helping Muslims become more integrated into and accepted by society and supporting their efforts to preserve aspects of their own culture could be steps that help prevent such radicalization.

Building on Existing Insights about Marginalized Immigrants

Decades ago, John Berry and colleagues[22–25] identified four different acculturation orientations that fall on two dimensions: the extent to which one maintains contact with one's heritage culture and the extent to which one forges connections with others in the larger society. These orientations apply to first-generation immigrants as well as to subsequent generations who grow up exposed to the heritage culture and the culture of the larger society. In Berry's formulation, those who primarily consider themselves part of the larger society but are not part of their own heritage culture are considered *assimilated;* those who primarily identify with their heritage culture but do not identify with the host culture are considered *separated*. Those who identify with both societies equally are *integrated,* and those who do not identify with either culture are *marginalized*. Overall, the integrated are the best off in terms of mental and physical health, success at school and work, and life satisfaction (see reference 23), and the separated and assimilated are better or worse depending on the context.[26] The marginalized do not fit in anywhere. These individuals were shown to be at risk for a number of negative outcomes in domains ranging from health to happiness to school and work adjustment (see references 22, 23, and 25).[27]

Michael Taarnby[28] and John Berry[29] have theorized that marginalization, alienation, and discrimination could be possible precursors to radicalization, although this has yet to be examined empirically. Several studies have found, though, that identity processes are important for radicalization. For example, a 2013 study of Muslim youth in the Netherlands found that feeling disconnected from Dutch society at large was an important determinant of developing a radical belief system.[30] Other research has recognized identity conflict as a risk factor for radicalization. Bernd Simon and colleagues found that Turks and Russians living in Germany showed greater sympathy for radical action when their German and heritage culture identities were perceived to be in conflict with each other.[31] This finding highlights the importance of understanding the interplay between cultural identities and the consequences of fitting in nowhere.

In this research, we build on previous work to address a new question, namely, whether and how *marginalization*—a condition wherein individuals do not identify with either the home or the host culture and are, in effect, culturally homeless—can increase attraction to and support for extremist groups and causes among immigrants. We expect that the marginalized person experiences feelings of significance loss and may be looking for opportunities to affirm a sense of identity and self-worth (see reference 10). Building on Michael Hogg's research (see references 13–17), we propose that marginalized immigrants feel a loss of significance and can be attracted to fundamentalist groups that offer a clear sense of inclusion and purpose and the opportunity to restore a sense of self-worth.

We are also interested in the factors that strengthen the relationship between marginalization and significance loss so we can identify potential interventions for policymakers. Research on terrorism highlights the role of acute negative events—such as job loss, financial struggles, and victimization or humiliation—in radicalization processes (see reference 10).[32–35] We further propose that discrimination is one such experience that can contribute to additional significance loss among marginalized Muslim immigrants. Discrimination against Muslims has increased in the post-9/11 era, as many are subjected to name-calling, racial profiling, and negative representations of Islam in the media.[36] A study of Muslims in the Netherlands revealed that perceiving discrimination from the Dutch majority strengthened identification with the immigrant culture and weakened commitment to Dutch society.[37] Although any immigrant can be a victim of discrimination, we expect that marginalized immigrants, who already lack the sense of self-worth that is afforded by social connectedness, may be particularly jarred by outside reminders that they do not fit into society. Therefore, we predicted that the link between marginalization and significance loss is exacerbated by experiences of discrimination, which increase the appeal of fundamentalist groups and causes. Although we made no specific predictions with respect to integration, assimilation, and separation, we controlled for these factors in our analysis to look at the

unique effect of marginalization on radicalization. We also examined whether they emerged as factors of risk or protection under conditions of discrimination.

We proposed a model in which marginalization relates to feelings of significance loss and those feelings, in turn, are associated with increased support for the behavior and ideologies of fundamentalist groups. We expected that experiences of discrimination would exacerbate the relationship between marginalization and a sense of significance loss. We examined this hypothesis using data from a one-time survey of nearly 200 Muslim Americans. Our findings support the proposed model, but the design of our study limits how much we can say about the dynamic, additive changes our model proposes.

A Survey of Muslim American Attitudes and Beliefs

We collaborated with an educational and community-based organization, the World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE), to administer surveys among first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants in the United States. To develop our survey materials and gain a more thorough understanding of the challenges Muslims experience in American society, we conducted 20 exploratory interviews.

Potential participants were contacted through WORDE, and the survey was administered online. The survey took between 30 and 40 minutes to complete for most participants, who received a $25 Amazon.com gift card as compensation. Given the sensitive nature of this survey, drawing responses from a random sample of unsolicited respondents would have been difficult. WORDE solicited participants from its contacts database and its social media networks, which include over 3,000 individuals from diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Their contact list comes from more than two decades of community building, research, and advocacy conducted by WORDE specialists across the United States. They have cultivated these relationships through programming and research initiatives in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area; Chicago; Houston; Los Angeles; Michigan; New Jersey; and New York, among other regions. Our survey focused on young adults because of the radicalization research that identifies 18- to 35-year-olds as representing the age range at the greatest risk (see reference 35).

Participants were 260 Muslims from 27 different states, but Maryland (60 participants), Virginia (35 participants), and California (30 participants) were the most strongly represented. Participants who did not meet eligibility criteria (for example, Muslim converts without a recent migrant background) or who failed to pay attention to the survey instructions were removed prior to analyses. We monitored for ineligible responses throughout the data collection process and closed the survey when we believed the number of analyzable data points met our initial sample target of 200 participants. Participants were removed from analyses if they failed more than one attention-check question, completed the survey in an unusually short time (that is, in less than 15 minutes), left large sections of the survey blank, or attempted to complete the survey more than once. We were ultimately left with 198 participants (78 male, 107 female, 13 who did not report gender; mean age = 27.42 years). In this sample, 92 were first-generation immigrants and 105 were second-generation Americans. We sampled from more than 20 heritage country backgrounds, but more than half (105 participants) identified Pakistan as their heritage country.

Because of the sensitive nature of the survey content, we took several steps to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Before providing consent to take part in the survey, participants first read a description of the purpose of the research, which was to understand more about the experiences of Muslims in the United States. We emphasized that identifying information would not be collected and encouraged participants to answer as honestly as possible, mentioning that some questions might be difficult to answer. The survey first asked participants about their cultural identity and experiences of discrimination in the United States. Then participants answered questions about their general psychological state, including items measuring a sense of significance loss. Questions about radicalization were placed near the end of the survey. Finally, participants completed a section of demographic questions. (A detailed description of our research methods is available online in the Supplemental Material.)

Querying about Risk Factors

Our survey used questionnaires with scaled responses to ask about marginalization, assimilation, separation, integration, experiences of discrimination, and feelings

of significance loss. We measured support for radicalization in two ways. We included questions that assessed support for a radical interpretation of Islam and presented participants with a description of a hypothetical group modeled after the attributes of violent extremist organizations. Participants were asked to indicate how much they thought people in their social circle would support such a group.

Acculturation

The measure of acculturation tapped into respondents' own feelings about their cultural customs and values, specifically with respect to integration ("I wish to maintain my heritage culture values and also adopt key features of American values"), assimilation ("I wish to give up my heritage culture values for the sake of adopting American values"), separation ("I wish to maintain my heritage culture customs rather than adopt American customs"), and marginalization ("I do not wish to maintain my heritage culture values or adopt American values as I feel uncomfortable with both types of values").

Our preliminary interviews suggested that one's identity as a Muslim is just as important as one's identity from one's country of origin, so we supplemented our measure of marginalization with two questions about Muslim culture rather than the heritage country: "There are times when I feel like I don't belong to any culture" and "Sometimes I don't feel part of American culture or part of Muslim culture."

Discrimination

We included an eight-item scale based on previous work on discrimination against Muslims.[38] Sample items include "Have you ever experienced hostility or unfair treatment because of your religion?" and "Have you ever experienced hostility or unfair treatment because of your cultural background?" Items were measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *all of the time*.

Significance Loss

We adapted the 24-item Need Threat Scale[39–41] with subscales for belongingness, meaningful existence, control, and self-esteem, as these are all needs thought to be captured in the quest for significance. We added four of our own items pertaining to humiliation, shame, hopelessness, and anger. These items were derived from interview responses as well as previous work on significance loss (see reference 10). Participants were asked to indicate on a five-point scale how often they felt different states and emotions.

Support for a Radical Interpretation of Islam

We included 10 items representing a radical interpretation of certain tenets of Islam, such as the meaning of jihad.[42] Sample items include "Muslims in America should help their oppressed brothers and sisters in other parts of the world by participating in combative jihad"; "It is important to give to Islamic charities, even if their ideological beliefs may be extreme at times"; and "Combative jihad is the only way to conduct jihad."

Support for Fundamentalist Groups

We presented participants with a description of a hypothetical fundamentalist group made up of young Muslims in the United States. The text was modeled after other radicalization research and adapted to fit the religious context (see reference 16). The description was tested in advance to ensure that the group was perceived as neither too extreme nor too mainstream. The hypothetical group made clear their stance against American maltreatment of Muslims and promised belongingness, commitment, and loyalty to potential members. Although violence was never explicitly mentioned, the hypothetical group justified extreme actions to support its cause. The full text can be obtained by contacting the authors.

Drawing from the the literature on the psychology of radicalization (see reference 16 and reference 31), we asked participants how much they thought most people they know would like the hypothetical group, how willing these friends would be to engage in activities on behalf of the group, and to what extent their friends would sympathize with the group should it engage in extreme behaviors. Because we expected that many participants would be reluctant to express their true opinions if they were asked about their own attraction to the group, rather than ask for their own opinions, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which most people they knew would be interested in the group, a

framing approach that has been used in other research as a substitute for measuring individual attitudes.[43,44] We formed a 12-item composite measure from these questions.

Measuring Potential Factors Contributing to Radicalization

We used a statistical method called *moderated mediation analysis*[45] to test our hypothesis that feelings of marginalization and significance loss would predict support for fundamentalist groups and causes. This allowed us to look at whether and how intermediary processes such as discrimination might explain the relationship between the two variables. We also wanted to examine how these relationships might change in response to additional experiences such as integration, assimilation, and separation. We ran the analyses twice to see connections with support for radical beliefs and support for fundamentalist groups. (A detailed description of our results is included in the online Supplemental Material. Supplemental Figures 1 and 2, for example, depict the moderated mediation relationship for each indicator of support for radicalism, and the unstandardized loadings with standard errors are provided in the text.)

Support for a Radical Interpretation of Islam

As expected, feelings of marginalization predicted a greater sense of significance loss. So did experiences of discrimination. Moreover, the relationship between marginalization and significance loss became stronger with more experiences of discrimination. In this formulation, feeling a loss of significance predicted support for radical interpretations of Islam.

Support for Fundamentalist Groups

As before, marginalization and discrimination were found to predict feelings of significance loss. This relationship between marginalization and significance loss became stronger with the experience of more discrimination. In turn, significance loss predicted attraction to fundamentalist groups. This analysis is in line with our prediction that marginalization could be related to attraction to fundamentalist groups if a person feels a loss of significance and high degrees of discrimination.

Although we focused primarily on the role of marginalization in this study, we also looked at the implications of other acculturation factors. Strong feelings of integration ran counter to a loss of significance. Assimilation, though, was unrelated to any of the variables of interest. Feelings of separation were associated with an increased risk for supporting radical interpretations of Islam. Marginalization was the only factor of acculturation that related to increased significance loss (see Figures 1 and 2).

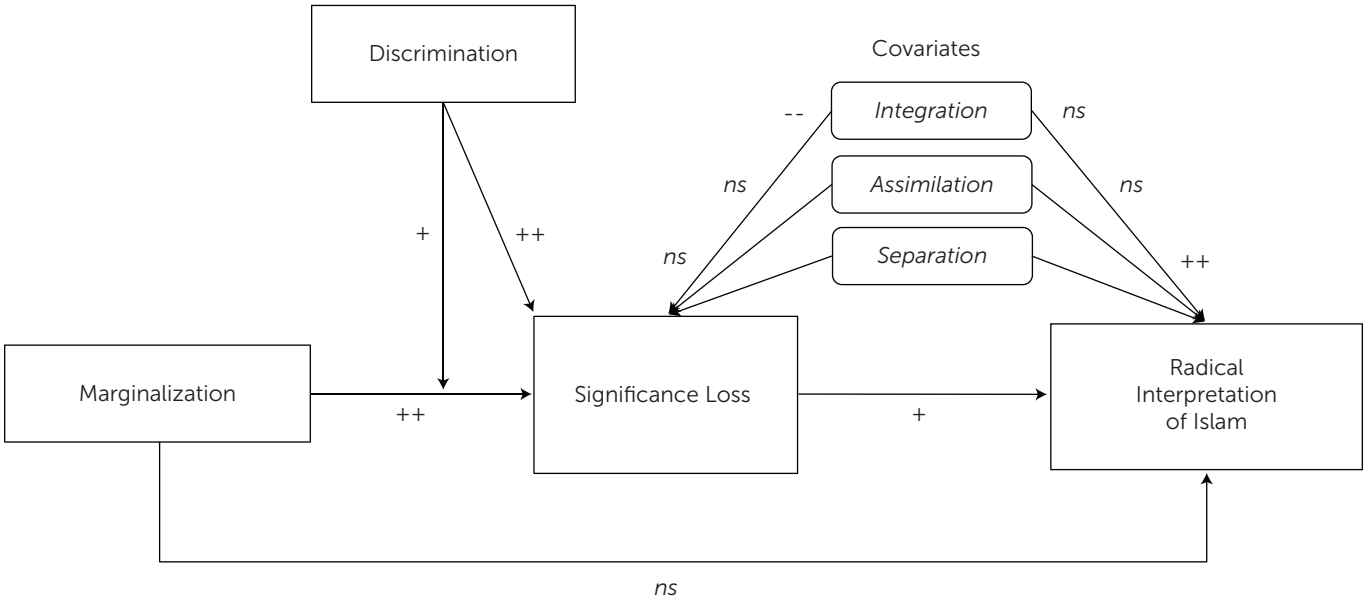
We tested interactions between the other acculturation variables and experiences of discrimination to determine whether any of them might be factors for risk or protection. We found two notable interactions. First, the more participants felt integrated, the less discrimination was associated with significance loss. Second, although separation by itself did not predict significance loss, it apparently did when it was paired with higher levels of discrimination.

Relevance to Extremist Group Recruitment

Terror attacks committed from within by a target country's citizens and by established immigrants have risen steadily in the past few years.[46] For instance, the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing was committed by brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, ethnic Chechen Muslims who had been in the United States for more than 10 years. The younger brother, Dzhokhar, was a naturalized U.S. citizen enrolled in an American college. Faisal Shahzad, who was foiled in an attempt to detonate a car bomb in Times Square in 2010, was also a naturalized American citizen. The two horrifying terror attacks on Paris in 2015 were led by Muslim men born in France and Belgium. Similarly, the late 2015 shooting rampage in San Bernardino, California, was led by a husband and wife; one was born in Chicago, the other was an immigrant born in Pakistan. Policymakers clearly need to be able to identify risk factors for the radicalization of established immigrants and to understand the psychological processes that attract at-risk individuals to violent extremist groups, with an eye toward creating effective prevention-oriented interventions.

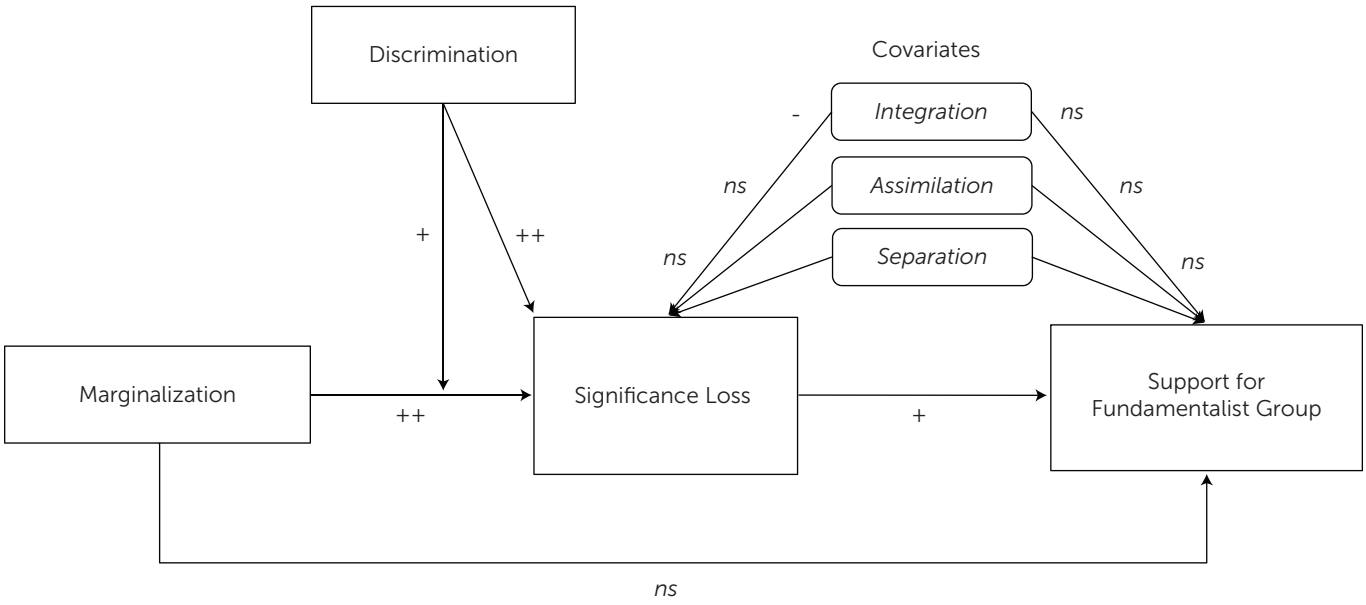
Some counterterrorism experts have postulated a link between radicalization and identity struggles (see reference 2),[47] and our research provides some of the first data supporting this relationship. Our results showed that marginalized immigrants in the United States may

Figure 1. Model showing the effect of marginalization on support for a radical interpretation of Islam is not direct but occurs via significance loss. The effect of marginalization on significance loss is exacerbated by experiences of discrimination.



ns = the relationship between the variables was not significant; + = a significant positive relationship at the $p < .05$ level; ++ = a highly significant positive relationship at the $p < .001$ level. -- = a highly significant negative relationship.

Figure 2. Model showing the effect of marginalization on support for the fundamentalist group is not direct but occurs via significance loss. The effect of marginalization on significance loss is exacerbated by experiences of discrimination.



ns = the relationship between the variables was not significant; + = a significant positive relationship at the $p < .05$ level; - = a significant negative relationship; ++ = a highly significant positive relationship at the $p < .001$ level.

be at much greater risk for feeling a loss of significance, which, in turn, may be related to increased support for fundamentalist groups and ideologies. A loss of significance stemming from personal trauma, shame, humiliation, and perceived maltreatment is associated with increased support for radicalism. Experiences of discrimination exacerbate this process. Discrimination by others in the larger society was associated with amplified feelings of a loss of significance, which, in turn, predicted support for fundamentalist groups and causes. Marginalization and discrimination are particularly potent when experienced in tandem.

Feelings of marginalization were the only acculturation variable associated with significance loss, because all of the other factors of acculturation could provide some sense of social identity and self-worth. Immigrants who were more integrated did not experience as much loss of significance as a result of discrimination, compared with their less integrated peers. However, our data suggest individuals who feel strongly tied to their heritage culture may suffer from significance loss when they feel discriminated against. Because we found that a loss of significance is associated with increased support for radicalism, it should raise concern that not only is discrimination related to an overall threatened sense of self-worth but that such experiences are particularly damaging for marginalized and separated immigrants.

This study cannot prove definitively what causes the radicalization of immigrants. The design of our study limits our ability to fully test our process-based model of immigrant radicalization. We might know more about that process if we had been able to administer the survey a second time, but that would have required collecting identifying information about our subjects so that we could follow up. Given our concern about participants answering sensitive questions honestly, we decided not to ask participants for their contact information.

We measured correlations, not causes. Although we feel our model offers a persuasive explanation, one also might propose that the causal arrows in the model run in the opposite direction. For example, it could be that support for radicalization leads to a loss of significance, which, in turn, causes immigrants to feel marginalized and excluded. It is also plausible that individuals who develop radical belief systems become distanced from moderate Muslims and the larger society. It is also possible that a loss of significance could add to a sense of withdrawal and increased perceptions of exclusion. Given the significance-restoring properties of extreme groups, however, we think it unlikely that support for radicalism would cause significance loss (see references 10 and 18).

Our study does not allow us to assess feedback loops that might propel the variables in the model. For example, it is possible that these processes form an additive loop in which marginalized individuals who experience discrimination become attracted to fundamentalist groups and, through their involvement in such groups, begin to feel further marginalized. Likewise, individuals who feel separate from society and who have developed radical ideologies may strengthen their identification with their heritage group, ultimately becoming more separated from the broader society. Future researchers could use longitudinal designs that measure individuals' experiences, feelings, and ideologies at multiple points in time to capture the dynamic process of immigrant marginalization and radicalization.

Because this study was based on a self-report survey, it could not measure actual radical thought and action. Some participants may not have answered the radicalism questions completely honestly because of social strictures or concern about being identified. We attempted to address this problem by recruiting participants through a trusted organization, by emphasizing that responses were totally anonymous, and by including radicalism measures that were not framed too directly (that is, we asked participants how much people in their social circle would support the hypothetical fundamentalist group). Future researchers should attempt to replicate these results in a randomized sample that is more broadly representative of American Muslims than was possible with our sample.

For practical reasons, it was impossible for us to measure actual extremism. Our results should not be taken to mean that individuals who are marginalized or excluded and experience significance loss will eventually join a violent extremism movement, but they may be at increased risk to do so. Presumably many individuals bear grievances against their host societies without ever engaging in violence.

Insights of Use to Policymakers

Recognizing the threat that violent extremism poses for national security, some political figures have taken

a "better safe than sorry" approach, proposing limits on the acceptance of Syrian refugees and other Muslim migrants as well as programs to monitor Muslims already on American soil. However, our data suggest that anti-Muslim rhetoric is likely to be counterproductive. Exclusionary policies reinforce the ISIS narrative that the West is anti-Islam, increasing its appeal for Muslims who are feeling marginalized and discriminated against and looking for opportunities to regain significance. We should not confuse being anti-ISIS with being anti-Islam.

We surmise that many of the counterterrorism initiatives and surveillance policies currently being used to identify violent extremists may actually paradoxically fuel support for extremism. Recent examples of homegrown plots lend support to this notion. For example, the failed Times Square bomber, Faisal Shahzad, felt angry about the treatment of Muslims in the United States and the West more generally following the September 11 attacks, as well as about American military intervention in Iraq under the pretense of searching for weapons of mass destruction. He told authorities that he had struggled to find a peaceful but effective way to cope before ultimately attempting to set off a car bomb in 2010.[48] Racial profiling and spying programs in the post-9/11 era that target Muslims are likely to induce feelings of perceived discrimination or exclusion and contribute to a sense of significance loss. Our findings should help to discourage policymakers from designing programs that aggravate or perpetuate hostility between the immigrant Muslim community and the Western governments under which they live.

The reality is that more than three million Muslims are already living in the United States[49] and more than thirteen million are living in Western Europe.[50] Efforts to prevent radicalization within Muslim communities are more likely to succeed if they focus on achieving integration rather than alienation. To this end, our data suggest several strategies. First, Muslims in the United States should not be forced to choose between American and Muslim identities. This means helping the moderate Muslim majority become more integrated into and accepted by society without being pressured to give up important aspects of their own culture, including but not limited to language, religious articles of clothing, dietary customs, and observance of religious rituals and holidays. Significance loss could be forestalled if American Muslims are able to develop an American identity without having to give up their cultural heritage. Integration strategies that provide opportunities for Muslim immigrants to actively maintain their multiple cultural identities may be able to reduce their vulnerability to marginalization and radicalization.

Unfortunately, fostering a more welcoming climate for integration is not as simple as hosting an ad campaign to promote a more positive image of Islam in society or stifling discriminatory discourse. Policymakers and society at large must acknowledge that a multicultural country's identity is derived from diverse sources of cultural influence, including meaningful contributions from individuals with a Muslim heritage.

Young Muslims who are at risk and feeling marginalized and discriminated against may be guided toward nonviolent groups that have significance-restoring effects on participants. Future researchers should search for groups and activities that provide attractive alternatives to violent extremist organizations that satisfy needs for significance.

In the United States, the federal government has proposed educational and cultural exchange projects geared toward promoting diversity, tolerance, and minority integration. The White House is looking to build community resilience programs for at-risk youth through technical skills training and opportunities for civic education, community service, and empowerment. Our research suggests that these types of programs hold promise, particularly if they focus on the acceptance of multiple identities and provide psychological inoculation against feeling a loss of significance. Obviously such government programs should be measured and evaluated to see whether they are successful in providing alternative avenues for at-risk youth to feel gains in significance and self-worth.

There are some real-world examples of how providing alternative avenues toward feeling significant can derail support for radicalism. One deradicalization program in Sri Lanka offered detained members of the Tamil Tigers vocational education programs that increased their sense of self-efficacy and prepared them for their reintegration into society. When compared with a control group, these individuals demonstrated decreased support for the violent struggle against the Sinhalese over time (see reference 11).[51] In the city of Aarhus, Denmark, law enforcement partnered with the Muslim community to approach at-risk individuals and steer them away from engaging in violent extremism.

The program has experienced some success and may reduce the likelihood of immigrants becoming marginalized and excluded.[52]

Our data only included a sample from the United States, but as recent events painfully demonstrate, homegrown radicalization and immigrant marginalization are not uniquely American problems. In the wake of the 2015 Paris attacks, Muslims in France have been telling global media that they struggle to be accepted as part of French society and feel restricted in expressing their Muslim identities in public spaces.[53] Fear-based discriminatory responses, such as France's 2010 ban on face-covering burqas and hijabs, merely reinforce anti-Muslim sentiment and lead to further disengagement of the Muslim community. In the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister's Task Force on Tackling Radicalisation and Extremism developed a counter-radicalization strategy to intervene at sites thought to be hotbeds for radicalization, including universities. In practice, British students who show signs of religiosity or political activism are often viewed with suspicion because of concern that they are at risk for radicalization.[54,55]

Radicalization is now a global problem, so future researchers will need to examine whether the model we studied here reflects the dynamics of radicalization in countries outside of the United States. For example, radicalization processes might be even more pronounced among individuals who feel marginalized or segregated in societies that have higher degrees of ethnocentrism and negative attitudes toward outsiders.[56] As our research advances, we are collecting data on immigrant acculturation processes and radicalization in Germany and other countries.

Violent extremism can no longer be considered a threat solely from the outside by Western nations. Groups working on counterterrorism efforts must look inward to ask what in our societies provides a fertile breeding ground for radicalism and motivates people to join extremist groups and causes, even at the cost of their own lives. Our research has shown that immigrant identity processes are an important contributing factor. We hope that attention to these findings might result in more effective homeland security policies focusing on prevention, more resources, and more accepting neighbors for Muslim communities in Western nations. This research suggests that finding ways to help at-risk individuals gain a sense of significance and belonging may be one promising strategy for preventing future acts of homegrown terrorism in some societies.

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This research was supported by the Science and Technology Directorate of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through Study of Terrorism and Behavior Grant 2012-ST-61-CS0001 made to the National Consortium on the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). The views and conclusions contained in this article are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or START. This research was also funded by an Anneliese Maier Research Award from the Humboldt Foundation and Office of Naval Research Grant 019183-001 awarded to Michele Gelfand. We also thank Arie Kruglanski and the START research group at the University of Maryland for their input throughout the research process.

supplemental material

- http://behavioralpolicy.org/supplemental-material
- Methods & Analysis
- Additional References

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