

From Uncertainty to Extremism: Social Categorization and Identity Processes

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Abstract

Societal change and personal life events sometimes make one feel uncertain about one's self and identity. According to *uncertainty-identity theory*, this self-uncertainty can motivate people to identify with social groups, particularly groups that provide a distinctive and clearly defined identity and associated normative beliefs and behavioral prescriptions. This process can make more extreme groups and behaviors attractive as a source of identification-contingent uncertainty reduction. People may zealously identify with highly distinctive groups that have strong and directive leadership and ideological and ethnocentric belief systems that proscribe dissent and prescribe group-normative behavior. This analysis has been extended to help illuminate how extremism may emerge in the context of religion, politics, gangs, leadership, and adolescent risk taking. This article describes uncertainty-identity theory, overviews empirical support for its main tenets, and outlines some directions for future research.

Keywords

social identity, social categorization, uncertainty, intergroup relations, group extremism

The world we live in can seem pervaded by extremism—rigid one-dimensional ideologies and worldviews, improbable conspiracy theories, strident and ethnocentric stereotypes, social exclusion and stigma, destructive popular unrest, terrorism and collective violence, and so forth. These belief systems and behaviors, which are an enduring focus of social psychological research (e.g., Dovidio, Glick, Hewstone, & Esses, 2010), often appear to be associated with feelings of uncertainty about one's world and one's place and identity within it. For example, Staub (1989) noted that genocides often arise under conditions of acute societal uncertainty.

In recent years, a number of social psychologists have explored the relationship between people's feelings of uncertainty about themselves and the world they live in and extremist belief systems and behaviors (see Hogg & Blaylock, 2012; Hogg, Kruglanski, & Van den Bos, 2013). These researchers have asked whether feelings of uncertainty can, under certain circumstances, lead people to extremism. How and when might uncertainty cause people to embrace all-encompassing exclusionary ideologies; identify with rigidly structured, intolerant, and ethnocentric social groups; and engage in radical, extreme, and sometimes violent intergroup behaviors (e.g., Jonas et al., 2014; Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, &

De Grada, 2006; Van den Bos, 2009)? In this article, I describe one particular account of the psychological relationship between uncertainty and extremism: *uncertainty-identity theory* (Hogg, 2007b, 2012).

Uncertainty, Identity, and Group Behavior

Uncertainty-identity theory describes the motivational role played by uncertainty in causing people to identify with social groups, ranging from small, interactive, task-oriented groups, such as teams and organizations, to large-scale social categories, such as ethnic, religious, political, or national groups. The core tenets of the theory are (a) that feelings of uncertainty, particularly uncertainty about or relating to who one is and how one should behave, motivate behaviors aimed at reducing uncertainty, and (b) that the process of categorizing oneself and others as members of a group effectively reduces

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self-uncertainty because it provides a consensually validated social identity that describes and prescribes who one is and how one should behave.

Uncertainty motivates behavior

Feeling uncertain about one's world and, in particular, how one should behave and how others will behave can be unsettling—even aversive (Jonas et al., 2014). Uncertainty makes it difficult to predict and plan behavior in such a way as to be able to act efficaciously. Not surprisingly, people try to reduce uncertainty about their perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. The pragmatist philosopher John Dewey captured the motivational prominence of uncertainty-reduction rather nicely: “In the absence of actual certainty in the midst of a precarious and hazardous world, men [cultivate] all sorts of things that would give them the *feeling* of certainty” (Dewey, 1929/2005, p. 33).

The experience of uncertainty can vary. If we feel we have the resources to resolve the uncertainty, it can be an exhilarating challenge to overcome—it is exciting and makes us feel edgy and alive, and it delivers a sense of satisfaction and mastery when we resolve it. If we feel we do not have the resources to resolve the uncertainty, it can be anxiety provoking and threatening, making us feel impotent and unable to predict or control our world or what will happen to us.

Furthermore, because resolving uncertainty can be cognitively demanding, we expend cognitive energy only on those uncertainties that are important or matter to us in a particular context. A key determinant of whether uncertainty matters is the extent to which it involves the self. We are particularly motivated to reduce uncertainty if we feel uncertain about things that reflect on or are relevant to the self—about our identity, who we are, how we relate to others, and how we are socially located. Ultimately, people need to know who they are, how to behave, and what to think, and who others are, how they might behave, and what they might think.

Group identification resolves uncertainty

That uncertainty motivates behavior is not a new idea (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Fromm, 1947; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982). What *is* new is uncertainty-identity theory's proposal that identifying with a group is a powerful way to resolve self-uncertainty. This proposal rests on social-identity theory's account of how social categorization of oneself and others underpins group identification and generates group and intergroup behaviors (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; also see Abrams & Hogg, 2010).

People mentally represent a social category as a relatively fuzzy set of attributes (attitudes, behaviors, etc.) that defines the category and differentiates it from other categories. Such *category prototypes* accentuate similarities among people within a category and differences between people in different categories and prescribe how one should behave as a category member. Category prototypes tend to be shared by members of the same group—we agree that “we” are like this and “they” are like that.

The process of categorizing someone as a category member transforms how we view them, bringing our perceptions and expectations in line with our prototype of the category. This process when applied to oneself (self-categorization) has the same effect; but now, of course, our own identity is transformed so that we identify with our group and our feelings and behaviors conform to our in-group prototype. Because group prototypes are largely shared, this process attracts consensual validation of who we are and of our attitudes, feelings, and behaviors from fellow in-group members as well as relevant out-group members. In this way, group identification reduces uncertainty about who we are and how we should act and about how others view us and will act toward us.

However, not all groups and identities are equally effective at reducing self-uncertainty. Those that do so most effectively are associated with distinctive, unambiguous, clearly defined, and tightly shared prototypes. These prototypes are provided by highly *entitative* groups—that is, groups that are well structured with clear boundaries, and in which members interact and share group attributes and goals and have a common fate (cf. Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). Because highly entitative groups are the most effective at reducing self-categorization-induced self-uncertainty, under conditions of uncertainty, people strive to identify with such groups or strive to accentuate the entitativity of groups they already identify with.

Evidence for basic processes

The key tenets of uncertainty-identity theory are well supported empirically (for an overview, see Hogg, 2000, 2007b, 2012). The fundamental prediction—that the more uncertain people are, the more likely they are to identify, and to identify more strongly, with a self-inclusive social category—has been confirmed across numerous studies of relatively minimally defined ad hoc laboratory groups (e.g., Grieve & Hogg, 1999; Mullin & Hogg, 1998). In these studies, people identified with and discriminated in favor of their own group only when they were categorized under conditions of uncertainty. Uncertainty was manipulated in a variety of ways. For example, participants described what they thought was happening in either ambiguous or unambiguous pictures, or they

estimated the number of objects displayed in pictures in which there were either very few objects or so many objects that they could only make a wild guess.

Other studies have shown that identification is stronger if participants are uncertain about something important and self-relevant and if the prototypical properties of the social category are relevant to the focus of uncertainty. Uncertainty also motivates people to overcome their natural inclination to disidentify from low-status groups: People placed in relatively low-status groups have been found to identify strongly with the groups under conditions of uncertainty (Reid & Hogg, 2005).

More recent studies have used direct manipulations or measures of self- and self-related uncertainty and have found support for the entitativity predictions described above. These studies have confirmed that people identify significantly more strongly with a group when they are experiencing self-uncertainty and the group is highly entitative (e.g., Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007) or psychologically prominent, relative to other groups, because of its distinctiveness or because people have few other social identities (Grant & Hogg, 2012). Furthermore, self-uncertainty has been found to lead group members to accentuate the entitativity of their group by polarizing its prototype from that of a relevant out-group (e.g., Sherman, Hogg, & Maitner, 2009).

There is also evidence that group identification does indeed resolve self-uncertainty and relieve associated anxiety, and that this may occur because identification mutes neural activity in parts of the brain that process anxiety (Jonas et al., 2014).

Totalist Groups and Extreme Behaviors

Under uncertainty, people identify more strongly with entitative groups because such groups provide a more clearly defined and directive sense of self. Uncertainty-identity theory takes this argument further to propose that this process lays the groundwork for extremism—strong, possibly zealous, identification with and attachment to highly distinctive groups that are intolerant of dissent; that are rigidly structured, with strong directive leadership; that have all-encompassing exclusionary and ethnocentric ideologies; and that promote radical and extreme intergroup behaviors. Such groups are not merely group-centric (Kruglanski et al., 2006) but perhaps more accurately characterized as “totalist” (Baron, Crawley, & Paulina, 2003).

Ideology and radical behavior

Self-uncertainty places a premium on identity-defining belief systems that are distinctive, unambiguous, all-encompassing, explanatory, and behaviorally prescriptive. This analysis has been applied to explain the

prevalence of zealotry and the attraction of fundamentalist ideologies in times of societal upheaval and transformation—for example, the attraction of fundamentalist religious ideologies during the early Renaissance and in the contemporary postmodern world of flexible moral principles (Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010; McGregor, Nash, & Prentice, 2010), and the contemporary attraction of both neo-fascist and anarchism-related political ideologies (Gaffney, Rast, Hackett, & Hogg, 2014; Haller & Hogg, 2014). It has also been used to explain why some adolescents confronting personal or cultural self-definitional uncertainties in their transition to adulthood may identify with violent gangs (Goldman, Giles, & Hogg, 2014) or with adolescent groups that engage in “at-risk” behaviors (Hogg, Siegel, & Hohman, 2011).

Controlled experiments have largely supported these analyses. For example, self-uncertainty caused students to identify more strongly with an extremist student group and to support more radical and extreme protest actions by the group (Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010), and self-uncertainty among Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews was more strongly associated with support for suicide bombing (Palestinians) or aggressive military action (Israelis) when national identity was central to self-definition (Hogg & Adelman, 2013). Another study found that people who were focused on their own death and were uncertain about what would happen to them after they died identified more strongly with their nation (Hohman & Hogg, 2011).

Directive leadership

For group membership and group identity to reduce one’s self-uncertainty, one needs to know what the group’s defining attributes are. The most reliable source of such information is the behavior of and direction given by group members who are highly prototypical and strongly identified with the group themselves—these individuals are highly influential and typically occupy leadership roles in the group, and formal leaders who are prototypical are more influential than those who are less prototypical (Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012). Under conditions of uncertainty, people should be particularly attentive to and compliant with their leaders and, quite possibly, welcome directive or even powerful autocratic leadership (Hogg, 2005, 2007a).

Research has provided some support for this analysis. A study of student groups found (as expected) that students supported a highly prototypical student leader more than a less prototypical leader, but when their self-uncertainty was elevated, this preference diminished or disappeared, entirely as a result of enhanced support for a non-prototypical leader: Uncertainty created a general desire for leadership per se (Rast, Gaffney, Hogg, & Crisp, 2012). In another study, organizational employees were

found to ordinarily prefer a less autocratic leader over an autocratic leader, but this preference was flipped under conditions of uncertainty: Self-uncertain employees were more supportive of an autocratic than a non-autocratic leader (Rast, Hogg, & Giessner, 2013).

Closing Comments and Current Directions

Uncertainty-identity theory describes how feelings of uncertainty about and related to the self, however caused, can lead people to identify with groups—particularly groups that are distinctive and clearly defined in terms of their attitudinal and behavioral attributes. This process may help explain one cause of and path to group extremism: Uncertainty encourages people to zealously identify with highly entitative groups that are characterized by strong and directive leadership and by ideological and ethnocentric belief systems that proscribe dissent and prescribe group-normative behavior. This analysis has been extended to help illuminate how extremism may emerge in the context of religion, politics, gangs, leadership, and adolescent risk taking.

Many of the key tenets of uncertainty-identity theory and its analysis of extremism have been empirically supported. This research program has been referenced and briefly described. However, research remains to be done and is currently underway. Although research using organizational employees and student groups seems appropriate for testing basic predictions, some of the predictions concerning group extremism would benefit from more studies of genuinely extreme phenomena like terrorism and violent gangs—but of course this kind of research is very difficult to conduct.

One focus of current research is on what may inhibit people from identifying with more extreme groups. One barrier to identification is that extreme groups may be considered unattractive, particularly by people who value diversity and individual autonomy. However, even these people may become attracted to extreme groups if their self-uncertainty is acute and enduring enough. Another impediment to identification with extreme groups is that they are intolerant of diversity and dissent and often have such strict criteria for entry and acceptance that it can be very difficult for people to gain membership in and identity validation from the group. Identity validation is important, perhaps critical, for self-uncertainty reduction. If it is difficult to be accepted and have one's identity validated by the group, and difficult to see how to be accepted, then the powerful self-uncertainty-reduction function of an extreme group is compromised. People may look elsewhere—to other, more “welcoming” extreme or less-extreme groups—to reduce self-uncertainty through identification with a less closed group.

Radicalization and extremism are global phenomena with often devastating consequences for human lives. If self- and identity-uncertainty play a key psychological role in extremism then, as just suggested, one way to protect society from zealous identification with extreme groups is to ensure that people have alternative, less extreme groups and identities to identify with when they feel self-uncertain. There is some evidence that this supposition may be true (McGregor, Haji, & Kang, 2008). Furthermore, people who define themselves in terms of many separate, distinct identities may be less prone to uncertainty-driven extremism than those who define themselves in terms of a single monolithic identity that saturates the self-concept (e.g., Grant & Hogg, 2012).

Recommended Reading

- Hogg, M. A. (2007a). (See References). A full and detailed theoretical statement of uncertainty-identity theory, with an overview of empirical studies.
- Hogg, M. A. (2012). (See References). A chapter that provides slightly more accessible coverage of uncertainty-identity theory and relevant empirical studies, in addition to covering more recent developments and giving a historical context to the theory's development.
- Hogg, M. A., & Blaylock, D. L. (Eds.). (2012). (See References). An edited collection of diverse and accessible chapters on the general topic of uncertainty and extremism that also addresses the applied relevance of the topic.
- Hogg, M. A., Kruglanski, A., & Van den Bos, K. (Eds.). (2013). (See References). A more recent and accessible collection of chapters on the general topic of uncertainty and extremism that also discusses possible policy implications.

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