

Researcher sheds new light on the psychology of radicalization

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Learning more about what motivates people to join violent ideological groups and engage in acts of cruelty against others is of great social and societal importance. New research from Assistant Professor of Psychology at NYUAD Jocelyn Bélanger explores the idea of ideological obsession as a form of addictive behavior that is central to understanding

why people ultimately engage in ideological violence, and how best to help them break this addiction.

In the new study, *The Sociocognitive Processes of Ideological Obsession: Review and Policy Implications* which appears in the journal *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, Bélanger draws from evidence collected across cultures and ideologies to describe four processes through which ideological obsession puts individuals on a path toward [violence](#).

The first is [moral disengagement](#): ideological obsession deactivates moral self-regulation processes, which allows unethical behaviors to happen without self-recrimination. The second is hatred: ideologically obsessed individuals are ego-defensive and easily threatened by information that criticizes their beliefs, which leads to greater hatred and potentially violent retaliation. Third, ideological [obsession](#) changes people's social interactions, causing them to gravitate toward like-minded people—networks—who support their violent thinking. And finally, these individuals are prone to psychological reactance, which makes them immune to communications that attempt to dissuade them from violence.

"As we seek ways to prevent and combat violent radicalization, we must understand this behavior as an addiction to an ideology, rooted in a feeling of absence of personal significance," said Belanger. "Common approaches, like trying to provide information that counters someone's hateful ideology, are not only futile, but often counterproductive. To steer people away from ideologically-motivated violence, we must focus on their psychological needs, such as meaning and belonging, and helping them attain richer, more satisfying, and better-balanced lives."

More information: Leor Zmigrod et al. Computational and neurocognitive approaches to the political brain: key insights and future

avenues for political neuroscience, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1098/rstb.2020.0130](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2020.0130)

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