

How researchers uncovered the shared personality profile of violent extremists

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Violent extremism—be it political or religious—is a persistent global problem, which has [escalated considerably in the US](#) in the last decade. Why do some people resort to violence for their cause?

Research on the causes of [violent extremism](#) has often focused on [social](#)

[or political explanations](#). It has particularly investigated Islamist extremism and marginalized individuals or groups in society.

Social and political factors no doubt play a role. But could there also be shared psychological characteristics among individuals who endorse group-based [violence](#) in different contexts? And could this extend to non-political forms of violence?

In a series of studies, my colleagues and I have unpacked the basic psychology of violent extremism.

Almost every month, there are reports in the news of violent extremism or politically motivated violence in the west. These include [terror attacks](#) in Europe, the storming of the Capitol in Washington, and violence occurring at political demonstrations (both left- and rightwing).

Different forms of violence seem to have different motivations. Rightwing extremism aims to preserve the status quo whereas leftwing extremism aims to overthrow it.

But if we take a closer look at the rhetoric of known terrorists, such as the [London 7/7 bombers](#), the [Christchurch mosque shooter](#) —or [Islamist](#), [rightwing](#) and [leftwing movements](#)—they appear to have one thing in common. They all feel that their group, or a group they support, is unjustly disadvantaged.

Humility and emotional sensitivity

We wanted to unpick the influence of personality on whether an individual endorses violence for their cause. Not everyone who thinks that their group is unjustly disadvantaged resorts to violence. This begs the question of whether basic [personality traits](#) are at play.

[We've uncovered](#) common personality and social psychological factors among those who endorse group-based violence in different contexts. In three studies, we gathered survey responses from 394 Black Lives Matters supporters in the US (during the 2020 protests), 252 immigration-critical Swedes, and 445 football supporters in Sweden.

We included measures of personality from the [Hexaco personality inventory](#) and social psychological factors. We also included items measuring support for violence, violent behavioral intentions and self-reported violence and aggression. Each of these measures was adapted for the specific context and type of violence.

Individuals who endorsed violence for their cause indeed scored highly on feelings of "group-based relative deprivation"—that their group was unjustly disadvantaged. When it came to personality, individuals who endorsed violence, and reported violent intentions or actual engagement in violence, scored low on the personality traits known as "honesty-humility" and "emotionality".

[Honesty-humility](#) is a [personality trait](#) which captures the extent to which an individual is humble, fair and genuine in their interactions with others. Emotionality, on the other hand, as measured by the [Hexaco inventory](#), refers to the tendency to experience fear, anxiety and sentimentality. Low emotionality can make it harder to empathize with the suffering of others. It may also mean you are less likely to worry about the consequences of your actions.

Individuals low on these two traits may therefore be more inclined to endorse violence for their cause. They are likely to have a general tendency towards antisocial behavior. They are also less fearful and anxious about the risks of their behavior.

The modesty factor

To follow up, we looked closer at the humility aspect of the honesty-humility trait. We thought this might explain why members of structurally advantaged groups, in particular, perceive that their group is unjustly disadvantaged.

Modesty refers to a person's belief about themselves in relation to others. Those high in modesty see themselves as no better than others, whereas those low in modesty feel superior and entitled to privileges.

In two studies, we gathered survey responses from structurally advantaged and disadvantaged groups. We looked at the association between modesty and feelings of "group-based relative deprivation". We first gathered survey responses from 171 white Americans and 163 black Americans, asking them the extent to which they felt unjustly disadvantaged as a white or black American. We then also gathered responses from 156 men and 153 women of mixed backgrounds, asking them the extent to which they felt unjustly disadvantaged as a man or woman.

As we expected, [we found](#) that members of structurally advantaged groups (men and white Americans) who scored low on modesty were more inclined to endorse the perception that their group was unjustly disadvantaged than those who scored high on modesty.

This pattern of results was not observed among structurally disadvantaged groups (women and black Americans).

Thus, personality traits can illustrate why some members of structurally advantaged groups perceive their group as disadvantaged—despite history and statistics suggesting otherwise. Low modesty predisposes them to feel that their group is not getting what they are entitled to.

This has implications for understanding why some people endorse the

rhetoric of, for example, the alternative ("alt") right and involuntary celibate ("incel") movements. Due to an immodest and hence entitled disposition more generally, people endorse the rhetoric that their group is not getting what they deserve.

These findings suggest that both basic personality traits and [social factors](#) help explain why individuals endorse group-based violence for their cause. Research solely focusing on social or social-psychological factors—and neglecting the role of [personality](#)—is missing an important piece of the "puzzle" of violent [extremism](#).

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