Study links obsessive passion and social alienation to support for political violence

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A car burning in the street. Credit: University of Córdoba

Violent extremism could be defined as support for violence to achieve political, ideological or social objectives. Under the umbrella of this type of mindset, violent acts are seen as a legitimate means of imposing a way of life in which there is no room for diversity. But what really underlies this type of behavior, and what drives a given person to exhibit these behaviors in which political violence is a desirable option?

A research team at the University of Cordoba (UCO) and the Marbella International University Center asked itself this same question and, in a study published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, analyzes some of the factors involved in this radicalization process. According to the main conclusions of the work, there are two elements that may foster extremism and that, therefore, can be considered risk factors: social alienation, and what in the scientific literature is known as "obsessive passion." The more intense these two feelings are, "the greater the support for political violence," the study states.

While social alienation can be understood as a feeling of detachment and disconnection from society, obsessive passion implies a tendency towards a certain activity in which, in a certain way, self-control is lost. "There is harmonious passion, which is positive and spurs us to perform rewarding actions, but also another linked to negative indicators of mental health and psychosocial adjustment," explained researcher Manuel Moyano, one of the researchers in the Department of Psychology at the UCO who participated in the study. It is precisely this latter feeling which, according to the results of the study, makes individuals more likely to respond violently to what they consider attacks on their identity.

To reach this conclusion, the team surveyed more than 1,500 people varying in age, background, education and employment status in two complementary studies. The first one evaluated the concept of religion as a cause of obsessive passion, while a second study, carried out with a different sample, analyzed another of the causes that can turn certain people into "obsessively passionate" beings: family. However, as the study points out, there are many causes that can give free rein to this uncontrolled passion and that should be taken into account in future studies.

Both studies confirmed the same hypothesis: the feeling of social

alienation—that is, of disengagement with society—can trigger extreme behavior and support for political violence, especially in "people who develop an obsessive passion for a particular cause or ideology," the study concludes.

Understanding how these factors are related, explains Professor Moyano, can be key to better understanding the mechanisms that lead to violent extremism and, above all, to developing new strategies focused on preventing political violence, a high-priority objective in times like today, in which new armed conflicts are reshaping international relations and in which various studies have warned of the increase in social polarization. In this context, understanding the social and psychological causes of the process of violent radicalization is crucial to being able to take proactive prevention and coping actions.

More information: Roberto M. Lobato et al, Disconnected Out of Passion: Relationship Between Social Alienation and Obsessive Passion, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2022). DOI: 10.1177/08862605221094631

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