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# The Protective Role of Friendship: Cross-group Friendship Mediates the Effect of Ideological Quest for Significance on Commitment to A Radical Group

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## Abstract

On the basis of the Quest for Significance theory, a person's sense of meaning and personal significance may be obtained from ideological narratives. The more a radical ideology gives a person a sense of meaning, the less likely it is that he or she will engage in interpersonal relations and friendships with out-group members. In this study, we hypothesized that ideological quest for significance would predict commitment to a radical group and that this association would be mediated through cross-group friendship. This research was based on interviews with 241 prisoners at 59 Indonesian prisons, who were serving sentences for terrorism offenses. Mediation analysis found that higher scores on ideological quest for significance significantly predicted lower scores on cross-group friendship, and lower scores on cross-group friendship significantly predicted higher scores on commitment to a radical group. There was a significant direct effect of ideological quest for significance on commitment to a radical group and a significant indirect effect using the bootstrapping method. This suggested that the effect of ideological quest for significance on commitment to a radical group was partially mediated by cross-group friendship.

## Keywords

Cross-group friendship, Commitment, Ideology, Radical group, and Quest for significance.

Past scholarly works suggest that radicalism may flourish in urban communities because of the uncertainty faced by the citizens in extremely dynamic mega-cities (Davison, 1978; Mah, 2014). But why is a person interested in joining radical Islamist terrorist networks? Such commitment involves the gradual adoption of radical doctrines or belief systems in a process called political radicalization (McCauley & Moskalkenko, 2010). According to McCauley and Moskalkenko (2010), this process involves changing prior beliefs, emotions, and behaviors so that a person may

endorse violence as a cardinal strategy. Radicalization in Islamic jihadist groups involves ideologization of jihad and strengthening of ideological narratives. In turn, this leads to radical behaviors, especially in the context of indoctrination by mentors and social ties within a terrorist group (Milla, Faturochman, & Ancok, 2014). By contrast, the efforts to moderate extremist ideology are called deradicalization.

Deradicalization is a social and psychological process, where a person's commitment to violent organizations and ideologies is alleviated to the extent that they are no longer at risk of conducting violent activities (Horgan, 2009). Deradicalization attempts to reduce a person's attachment to the values and ideas that made them become radicalized (Bjorgo & Horgan, 2008). In the past, scholars have examined how the goals of deradicalization can be achieved.

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Some theorists have noted the importance of exposure to alternate, non-violent ideological viewpoints, and interpersonal relationships (Garfinkel, 2007; Horgan, 2009). Others have noted the importance of social networks in shaping the behavior of individuals (Doosje et al., 2016). Previous studies have also provided evidence of successful deradicalization attempts. On the basis of the Quest for Significance theory, Webber and colleagues (Webber et al., 2018) found that the loss of personal significance (i.e., shame or humiliation) can motivate people to identify with extremist groups. A study by Milla, Hudiyana, and Arifin (2019) revealed that a positive attitude to deradicalization predicted a lower level of support for jihad, which was mediated by the adoption of alternative identities. Despite these findings, other approaches to deradicalization and the mechanisms of action should be further examined (Koehler, 2017).

Although it is known that psychological interventions (vs. relying on counter-ideology strategies) are essential (Koehler, 2016; Speckhard & Mitchell, 2016), research on the role of intra-psychological processes is not as prevalent in the literature on deradicalization. However, on the basis of the Quest for Significance theory, some scholars have successfully demonstrated that deradicalization may be achieved via psychological intervention (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Webber et al., 2017). According to the Quest for Significance theory, ideological narratives can be attractive because they offer a sense of meaning and the perception that an individual's life has an ultimate significance. Although far from the only factor that shapes individual radicalization (Kruglanski et al., 2014), ideologies, such as radical Islamist narratives, can tell a powerful story and give a powerful sense of personal meaning (e.g., I am God's hero, I will be rewarded with 73 virgins up in heaven, and I commit violence to save the people from heresy). Someone who is experiencing a lack of meaning in life or a loss of personal significance may be particularly drawn to these narratives since they provide an opportunity to restore meaning (Kruglanski & Fischbach, 2009; Webber et al., 2018). Because the existential search for meaning is such a fundamental human need (Pyszczynski et al., 2006), the ideological quest for significance may explain why someone joins a radical group, such as a terrorist organization.

The ideological pursuit of significance may also lessen a person's willingness to interact with social out-groups, especially if the out-groups are perceived as an enemy or a threat. According to the moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1999), people do not engage in hatred toward out-groups unless they can justify such conduct as having a moral purpose. When moral disengagement occurs, the out-groups may become dehumanized, further limiting interpersonal interactions between in-group members and other identities or out-groups. This lack of contact, or cross-group friendship, may enhance the hatred even further (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), which, in turn, may fuel the motivation for violence or commitment to violent organizations.

In this study, we argue that, among individuals who have committed terrorism, the ideological quest for significance can predict commitment to a radical group via the mediating role of cross-group friendship. The more that an ideology gives a person a certain sense of meaning, the less likely they are to engage in interpersonal interactions with out-groups and befriend out-group members. Consequently, their commitment to a violent in-group grows, and hatred toward out-groups is further fueled.

This study is based on surveys conducted with Indonesian prisoners who were convicted of terrorism, but have since joined the deradicalization program conducted by the government of Indonesia. However, we do not limit the possible implications of this study to radical groups only. Rather, we assumed that our hypothesized model might also be prevalent in the general population, especially in urban settings. Large urban communities (as opposed to rural communities) host diverse human identities, cultures, and traditions, where local communities exist alongside international trade networks and immigrant communities, a fertile ground for populism and radicalism (Davison, 1978; Mah, 2014). Within this environment, individuals may perceive their conditions as chaotic and uncertain, and where uncertainty and chaos exist, individuals may adopt an extreme ideology to restore their certainty (Kruglanski et al., 2014).

### *Cross-Group Friendship as a Mediator*

Garfinkel (2017) noted that a key factor in the

transformation from violence to peace is the role played by personal relationships. He stated that “change often hinges on a relationship with a mentor or friend who supports and affirms peaceful behavior” (p. 1). At a broader level, social networks are known to have an essential role in explaining one’s involvement in radical groups and support for radical ideology (Kruglanski, Webber, Jasko, Chernikova, & Molinario, 2018; Sagemen, 2004; Schils, 2017). Many members of radical groups are bound together by strong personal ties and by their shared activist experiences (Porta, 1995; Snow & Cross, 2011). Furthermore, individuals who have previously joined radical groups and adopted extremist ideologies can attract family members and friends to the group (Atran, 2010; Sageman, 2004; Schils, 2017).

Joining an extremist group is likely to affect a person’s relationships with other groups. Extremist groups usually perceive inter-group relations as competitive and try to isolate group members from the influence of other groups (Milla & Umam, 2019). By contrast, encouragement of relationships with other groups is thought to be beneficial as it reduces competitiveness between groups and creates more positive intergroup attitudes, such as willingness to cooperate (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011). In the present study, we hypothesized that cross-group friendship would predict a decrease in commitment to radical groups based on low support for radical ideology.

Moreover, without cross-group interactions, individuals are bounded within a condition of extreme group entitativity (Ommundsen, Yakushko, Van der Veer, & Ulleberg, 2013), whereby individuals may perceive their group as distinct from, and even more superior than, other groups (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007). Such group entitativity reduces the exchange of information and positive social interactions with other groups. Furthermore, this may foster radicalism since individuals tend to focus on goals derived from a single jihadist identity, as opposed to more balanced goals from various identities (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Weber et al., 2018). Although a person may primarily seek to defend his/her religious identities or groups, when they also possess other identities (e.g., career-related or family-related), an extreme religious goal will be balanced by

other life goals. For instance, a husband may wish to go to war in order to defend his religion, but he is unable to do so because he needs to provide for his family.

### *Research hypothesis*

In this study, we predicted that higher scores on ideological quest for significance would predict higher scores on commitment to a radical group. It was further anticipated that this relationship would be mediated by cross-group friendships, with lower scores on cross-group friendship predicting higher scores on both ideological quest for significance and commitment to a radical group.

### **Methods**

The data for this study were collected in 2016 in coordination with the National Agency for Combating Terrorism.

### *Participants and Procedures*

In 2016, there were 241 individuals convicted of terrorism in 59 Indonesian prisons. These detainees had been convicted and sentenced because they were either leaders, members, or supporters of terrorist networks. Of the 241 detainees, only 59 (100% male) participated in the 2016 deradicalization intervention program run by the Indonesian government. These 59 detainees were chosen by the prison officials because they were willing to participate in the intervention, and they had finished the previous stage of intervention, which is the identification stage. The final number of participants who contributed data to this study was [59]. However, some of these participants’ data could not be completed because the participants did not provide the interview data related to the variable of interest. Thus, we regarded such cases as missing data. In the final mediation analysis, we included only 49 participants whose data were deemed as complete.

The research interviews were conducted as part of an intervention session. Each session lasted approximately two hours, with approximately [insert amount of time] devoted to the research questions. Within each group, there were two raters who assumed the role of facilitator.

The raters measured the participants' level of commitment to the radical group, quest for significance based on ideology, and cross-group friendship by asking semi-structured questions regarding the three variables. Examples of the questions were: "what is your opinion about the recent bombing committed by one of the jihadist groups?"; "tell us from your perspective about how you joined the jihadist movement, chronologically"; "do you have any friends other than those from the jihadist movement?". Afterward, the raters discussed the interview results and assigned a consensus score on each variable for each participant. We used the consensus scores in our statistical analyses. The consensus score was regarded as ordinal because the raters assigned it on the scale of 1 to 4 - with the details of each scales described below. All of the variables were not nominal because each scale represents the degree of score.

**Measures**

Commitment to a radical group was defined as a willingness to set the radical group's goals as personal goals. It was measured on a scale of 1 to 4, where "1" is self-identification to the radical group, "2" is adopting group values from the radical group, "3" is compliance to the rules of the group and the command of the radical group leader, and "4" is the willingness to sacrifice (sacrificing resources, energy, time, or even lives) to achieve group goals.

Quest for significance based on ideology was defined as the quest for meaning that is obtained through the "jihad as war" ideology. It was measured on a scale of 1 to 4, where "1" is the motivation to fulfill a personal goal in their

involvement of jihadist group, "2" is the motivation to fulfill interpersonal relations in their involvement of jihadist group, "3" is the motivation to fulfill a group goal in their involvement of jihadist group, and "4" is the motivation to apply the "jihad as war" ideology in their involvement of jihadist group. The raters regarded these data as ordinals in the sense that the higher the scores, the more that involvement in the jihadist group was motivated by a more abstract ideological goal as opposed to the personal goals.

Cross-group friendship was defined as the breadth of relationships with people outside the group. It was measured on a scale of 1 to 4, where "1" is a relationship only with their group, "2" is a relationship with friends from other groups who are considered not hostile to Islam (such as Hinduism and Buddhism), "3" is a relationship with group members without distinguishing ethnic and religious backgrounds, and "4" is relations with group members who are representatives of the enemy (e.g. governments) who they perceived as infidels.

**Data Analysis**

To test our hypothesis, we conducted a mediational analysis using Hayes Process Macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2013). We aimed to identify the direct effect of ideological quest for significance (independent variable, IV) on the commitment to a radical organization (dependent variable, DV), as well as the indirect effect of cross-group friendship in mediating the association between the IV and DV.

**Table 1. Zero-order correlations**

	1	2	3
1 Commitment to a radical group (n = 49, M = 1.82, SD = 1.09)	1		
2 Ideological quest for significance (n = 52, M = 2.19, SD = 1.17)	0.59***	1	
3 Cross-group friendships (n = 54, M = 2.72, SD = 0.92)	-0.54***	-0.41**	1

Note. \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ , n = number of participants, M = mean, and SD = standard deviation.

## Results

Zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics and the association between variables are shown in Table 1. Cross-group friendship was negatively correlated with commitment to a radical group and ideological quest for significance, and commitment to a radical group and ideological quest for significance were positively correlated with each other.

### Hypothesis Testing

We found that higher scores on ideological quest for significance significantly predicted lower scores on cross-group friendship ( $b = -0.34$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $t = -3.01$ ,  $p = .01$  [95% confidence interval:  $-.58$  to  $-.11$ ]), and lower scores on cross-group friendship also significantly predicted higher scores on commitment to a radical group ( $b = -0.38$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $t = -2.92$ ,  $p = .01$  [95% confidence interval:  $.14$  to  $.70$ ]). Looking at the association between the ideological quest for significance and commitment to a radical group, there was a significant direct effect ( $b = 0.46$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $t = 4.19$ ,  $p < .001$  [95% confidence interval:  $-.02$  to  $.59$ ]) and a significant indirect effect the using bootstrapping method ( $b = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.07$  [95% confidence interval:  $.03$  to  $.28$ ]). This suggested that the effect of ideological quest for significance on commitment to a radical group was partially mediated by cross-group friendship. See Figure 1 for the conceptual structure.

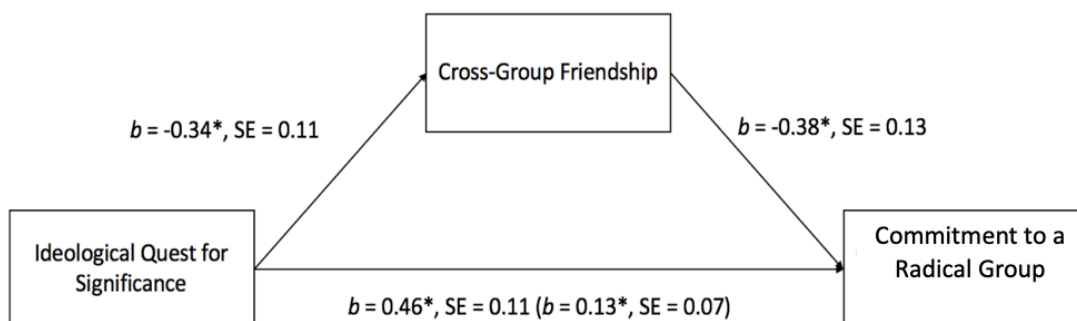
## Discussion

The results of this study are consistent with our hypothesis. Commitment to a radical group was predicted by ideological quest for significance, directly and indirectly. Indirectly, it was partially mediated by cross-group friendship. These findings indicate that, the higher a person's ideological quest for significance, the less likely they are to engage in cross-group friendship, which, in turn, fuels commitment to the radical group.

For individuals involved with an extremist group, the quest for significance may directly influence the strength of their commitment to the group, since the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation (Pyszczynski et al., 2006). A person is willing to sacrifice his or her own resources, health, and even life for the sake of this sense of belongingness. Extremist Islamic ideological narratives provide stories about the beauty, heroism, and sexiness of martyrdom and self-sacrifice while also inspiring loyalty to the radical group. A person may be willing to get involved in a terrorist social network precisely because it may enhance their self-esteem (Pyszczynski et al., 2006) and give them ultimate certainty in the middle of a life crisis (Kruglanski et al., 2014).

Although the ideological quest for significance itself may influence commitment to violent radical groups, other factors may also explain this relationship. A person with a strong

Figure 1. Result of mediational analysis



Note. \* =  $p < .05$ ,  $b$  = beta, and  $SE$  = standard error.

ideological quest for significance may dehumanize other out-groups, especially those that are perceived as an enemy or a threat. For instance, an Islamic terrorist group from Indonesia may perceive Indonesian citizens as infidels for their apparent belief in democracy and a non-sharia legal system (Milla et al., 2014). In such a case, members from the terrorist group may not wish to befriend or engage in interpersonal relationships with out-groups. The lack of contact with out-groups, or cross-group friendships, may then further enhance the hatred toward out-groups (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), and it may also empower their commitment for violence toward out-groups, which was previously fueled by ideological quest for significance.

Cross-group friendship has an important role in deradicalization because radical individuals are usually isolated and limit their interactions with out-group members (Milla & Umam, 2019). From our study, it is evident that a lack of interpersonal interactions with other groups can increase support for a radical group. As explained by Horgan (2009), the experience of interacting with different groups can provide opportunities for radical individuals to be exposed to different views, which may counteract violent behaviors. Cross-group friendship may also be a factor in increasing the complexity of individual identities and reducing group entitativity. Consequently, individuals who engage in cross-group friendships are likely to be much less vulnerable to joining radical groups or developing extremist identities (Hohman, Dahl, & Grubbs, 2016).

The findings of this study suggest that one of the factors involved in the successful deradicalization of terrorist prisoners is exposure to people with different viewpoints, identities, and backgrounds (e.g., social status, professional background, and religious denomination). The experience of a variety of positive social interactions while serving a prison sentence can also expose terrorism inmates to alternative life goals beyond their religious goals.

As this study utilized cross-sectional data and did not directly control the effect of ideological quest for significance on commitment to a radical group, internal validity is limited. However, our external validity is arguably better because we obtained the data from Indo-

nesian prisoners convicted of terrorism offenses. Furthermore, we avoided the use of self-reports because it may be prone to social desirability or elicit reluctance from the detainees in the prison context. Thus, we used the rater or informant report to handle such an issue. However, this may have introduced another set of problems, such as rater's bias and inequivalence between raters. We acknowledge this limitation, and we hope that future studies will address this issue.

## Conclusion

In sum, we conclude that viewing ideological goal as quest for significance may affect higher commitment to radical movements, and this may be shaped or mediated by the lesser contact for those who do not share the ideology. The lack of contact created an echo chamber while at the same time, strengthening the perceived superiority of one's identity. Consequently, this affects the higher commitment toward one's identity. Future studies should replicate these findings in general populations and provide stronger cause-effect evidence for our claim.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this research.

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