

How Frustration of low and high order needs Affects extremism and radicalization vs. cohesion and prosociality

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Humanity is facing several threats right now. To the effects of climate change other threats such as nuclear weapons, pandemics of new and untreatable disease, and the advent of powerful, uncontrolled new technology are added. Social science research has provided a significant amount of evidence that threats can have a considerable influence on societal processes. Two contrasting impacts have been identified: a unifying impact and a polarizing impact. The former impact is impressively in evidence in the immense coordination of efforts exhibited these days by societies around the globe. As a consequence of the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, nations and individuals are striving for synchrony and making significant changes in their lifestyle to fight the pandemic. Individuals are sacrificing their own freedom and following restrictive rules to protect themselves and others from the deadly consequences of the virus. Relatedly, political leaders who are endorsing and setting these rules have seen an increment in their public approval.

These outcomes are in line with prior research concerning, the idea that under immediate danger, the importance of social coordination increases and that central authorities (e.g., the federal government) are perceived as necessary facilitators, and the only available source of help and that under mortality salience individuals tend to support one's culture's major values and to exhibit pro-social attitudes and behaviors. However, whereas some studies have shown that threats lead to increased social coordination, greater group cohesion, and pro-social behaviors others suggest that external threats can cause political extremism, racial conflict, and even terrorism. For example, during the current pandemic, mounting data suggest an increase in intergroup-conflicts. In fact, violence and extremist organizations propagandas (e.g., white supremacists, far-right, Islamic) inciting violence has seen a boost. What are the conditions that determine these different responses to threats? Are pro-social vs. anti-social responses determined by the activation of different needs?

The aim of the proposed research is to respond to these questions. We suggest that an important aspect of this dual response to threats concerns the distinction between basic needs (e.g., need for survival, safety, or security) and high-order (i.e., need to matter, be significant, be respected, and have social status). We hypothesize that these needs will have a contrasting impact on individuals' social and political attitudes. Specifically, we hypothesize that when basic needs (e.g., lack of access to food, shelter, safety) are focal, individuals will have the tendency to coordinate, help each other to overcome the difficulty, and support mainstream authorities that help to coordinate the individuals' efforts. Whereas threats to basic needs will be negatively related to anti-social tendencies, extremism, and radical political attitudes. On the other hand, frustrated significance needs (e.g., loss of one's possessions, one's job, and/or feeling discriminated and left out) will be positively related to radical political attitudes and intergroup conflicts, and negatively related to support for mainstream authorities.

In the first empirical part of the project, we will conduct interviews and surveys with extreme vs. non extreme individuals residing in two countries. We will compare the link between basic and higher order needs with anti-social and pro-social behaviors. The second part consists of longitudinal and experimental studies. With the longitudinal study, in two countries, will investigate the change in basic and high order needs over time and the effect of time on their relationship with anti social and pro social behaviors. With the experiments, in four countries, we will test the causal mechanisms between the variables.