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What is This?

Turning away from terrorism: Lessons from psychology, sociology, and criminology

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Abstract

Although research on violent extremism traditionally focuses on why individuals become involved in terrorism, recent efforts have started to tackle the question of why individuals leave terrorist groups. Research on terrorist disengagement, however, remains conceptually and theoretically underdeveloped. In an effort to enhance our understanding of disengagement from terrorism and pave the way for future empirical work, this article provides a multidisciplinary review of related research from psychology, sociology, and criminology. Significant promise for moving beyond the existing push/pull framework is found in Rusbult and colleagues' investment model from psychology and Ebaugh's research on voluntary role exit from sociology. Rusbult's investment model offers insight into *when* and *why* individuals disengage from terrorism, while accounting for individual, group, and macro-level differences in the satisfaction one derives from involvement, the investments incurred, and the alternatives available. Ebaugh's research on voluntary role exit provides a deeper understanding of *how* people leave, including the emotions and cuing behavior likely to be involved. The article highlights the strengths and limitations of these frameworks in explaining exit and exit processes across a variety of social roles, including potentially the terrorist role, and lends additional insights into terrorist disengagement through a review of related research on desistance from crime, disaffiliation from new religious movements, and turnover in traditional work organizations.

Introduction

There is a growing interest in understanding why people leave terrorist organizations. Reasons include the increased visibility of former terrorists in efforts to counter violent extremism and heightened discussions regarding the benefits of studying group and network vulnerabilities. Perhaps the most obvious reason is the salience of terrorist recidivism following the emergence of terrorist 'deradicalization' programs and the release and re-engagement of several Guantanamo Bay detainees.

A major obstacle to understanding terrorist disengagement is that existing research remains devoid of conceptual clarity. The synonymous and inconsistent use of the terms disengagement (i.e. the cessation of terrorist behavior) and deradicalization (i.e. the elimination of one's belief in a violent, extremist ideology) is one indicator (e.g. Kruglanski et al., 2013: 560). As Horgan & Altier (2012) noted, not all individuals who engage in

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terrorism are radical and not all individuals who disengage are 'deradicalized' upon their departure.

The study of disengagement also poses methodological challenges. Given that most terrorists operate in secret, representative samples are difficult to obtain, as are measures of key variables over time. Prior work demonstrates the feasibility of approaching small samples of *former* terrorists (Horgan, 2009). However, aside from the absence of a control group of individuals who remain engaged in terrorism, many former terrorists may conceal their involvement and those willing to talk with researchers may differ systematically from those who remain silent. Further, former terrorists may use their accounts to pursue political goals, sensationalize events, or justify prior behaviors to governments, constituencies, and themselves (Cordes, 1987).

Despite such obstacles, the study of terrorist disengagement should not be abandoned. However, future research should be informed and guided by existing models of exit processes across the social sciences. While there are fundamental differences between involvement in terrorism and other social roles that should not be discounted, there are potential similarities in why and how individuals choose to leave a social role and related organization. Greater attention to conceptual frameworks and empirical findings from psychology, sociology, and criminology yields important insights. These literatures enhance our conceptualization of what it means to disengage from terrorism and provide a foundation for generating informed and testable hypotheses about why and how individuals leave terrorist groups.

We begin by reviewing the literature on terrorist disengagement. We then introduce two theoretical frameworks that advance our understanding of the process: Rusbult and colleagues' investment model from social psychology, which explains *when* and *why* individuals exit certain social roles, and Ebaugh's research on voluntary role exit from sociology, which highlights *how* individuals leave. We demonstrate the utility and limitations of these frameworks in understanding a variety of exit decisions and offer additional insights through a review of the literature on criminal desistance, disaffiliation from new religious movements (NRMs), and commitment and turnover in traditional work settings. Finally, we discuss potential applications to the terrorist domain and conclude with directions for future research.

Why terrorists leave

We define *disengagement* as the process of ceasing terrorist activity. Rather than one finite step, we suggest disengagement is a dynamic process resulting in a shift to a new role (and identity) outside of the organization. Characterizing disengagement as a complex process that may include changes at the level of personal identity mirrors recent work on criminal desistance (e.g. Bushway et al., 2001; Laub & Sampson, 2001) and disaffiliation from NRMs (e.g. Aho, 1988; Bromley, 1991).

Although there is no single reason why individuals turn away from terrorism, drawing primarily on in-person interviews with former terrorists, researchers have identified certain 'push' and 'pull' factors that make disengagement more likely (e.g. Bjørgo, 1997, 2009; Horgan, 2009; Reinares, 2011) (see Table I). Push factors are aspects related to individuals' experiences while involved in terrorism that drive them away. Pull factors are outside influences that lure individuals to a conventional social role. We briefly describe each below.

Push factors

Unmet expectations. A common realization among recruits is the stark contrast between the fantasies that influenced one's involvement in terrorism and day-to-day reality. For instance, someone who joined a terrorist organization to become a bomber may become dissatisfied when his or her days are spent as a lookout. This 'shattering' of one's romantic dream is a consistent theme Horgan (2009) observed across accounts of disengagement from various terrorist organizations. This broader notion of unmet expectations encapsulates several more specific push factors reviewed below.

Disillusionment with strategy or actions. Individuals may become frustrated with their group's lack of success or reject its tactics. In a review of the literature, Bjørgo (2011) noted that the failure of terrorist organizations to achieve what members hoped or expected generates disillusionment, which may precipitate disengagement. Studies of the terrorist organization ETA by Alonso (2011) and Reinares (2011) similarly discovered that disillusionment with the group's overarching strategy or specific actions were key reasons for leaving.

Disillusionment with personnel. Just as individuals may become disillusioned with the organization as a whole, they may grow disenchanted with the behavior of leaders and fellow members (Reinares, 2011; Bjørgo, 2011). Harris (2010) maintained that failed leadership and in-fighting among members might weaken one's emotional bond to the group and increase the likelihood of exit. Bjørgo (2011) suggested certain members, whom he termed drifters or followers, are particularly susceptible

Table I. Factors for terrorist disengagement

Push factors	*Pull factors*
• Unmet expectations	• Competing loyalties
• Disillusionment with strategy/actions of terrorist group	• Positive interactions with moderates
• Disillusionment with personnel	• Employment/educational demands or opportunities
• Difficulty adapting to clandestine lifestyle	• Desire to marry/establish a family or family demands
• Inability to cope with physiological/psychological effects of violence	• Financial incentives
• Loss of faith in ideology	• Amnesty
• Burnout	

to this push factor given involvement is motivated by the companionship and sense of belonging the group provides.

Difficulty with clandestine lifestyle. Some terrorists have difficulty living in secret. There are psychological barriers individuals must overcome when adapting to the social isolation intrinsic to certain terrorist roles (Horgan, 2006). For some, the reality of balancing the costs of their increased, sustained, and focused involvement with the rewards of membership may pose a significant challenge causing their departure.

Inability to cope with violence. Although idealistic expectations of enacting societal change may lead individuals into terrorism, recruits may face the bitter reality that their roles entail perpetrating acts of violence – sometimes against innocent victims. Bjørgo (2009) found that many individuals exited extreme right-wing groups because their use of violence left them with a feeling they 'had gone too far'. Alonso (2011) and Reinares (2011) similarly reported that some ETA members disengaged due to the fear and paranoia associated with perpetrating attacks.

Loss of faith in the ideology. Perhaps the most often touted reason for disengaging is a loss of faith in the group's underlying ideology. When evidence contradicting the ideology surfaces, it may initiate a period of reflection in which individuals question their radical orientation (Rabasa et al., 2010). Such doubts may lead to the unraveling of one's entire belief structure and disengagement (Harris, 2010). For example, changes in state policy, including conciliatory measures or the opportunity to pursue one's aims through democratic means, may cause individuals to reassess aspects of the ideology, including the need for violence, and prompt their departure (Cronin, 2006; Alonso, 2011).

Burnout. Sustained involvement in terrorism may burn individuals out as fatigue, exhaustion, and stress take

their toll (Bjørgo, 2011). In interviews with former members of ETA, Reinares (2011) discovered burnout was a key reason for their leaving. Della Porta (2009) similarly reported that burnout accelerated the exit process in several life histories of Red Brigade members.

Pull factors
Competing loyalties. Terrorists experience different degrees of loyalty to their organization, whether the result of ideological, social, emotional, or some other bonds (e.g. sunk costs). However, changing or competing loyalties to a new group or cause (Demant & de Graaf, 2010), religion (Garfinkel, 2007; Reinares, 2011), or one's family (Bjørgo, 2011; Reinares, 2011) may lure individuals out of terrorism. Competing loyalties reflect a broader pull factor that captures several more specific pulls discussed below.

Employment/educational demands or opportunities. The demands of conventional work and/or school may be so hard to balance with sustained involvement in terrorism that they precipitate disengagement. New economic and educational opportunities may also persuade individuals to leave terrorism behind. Abuza (2009) concluded terrorist rehabilitation program participants in South Asia were more likely to disengage if they had employment opportunities. Disley et al. (2011) further suggested stable, conventional employment reduced one's dependency on the group for income.

Family demands/desires. Dedication to one's family or the desire to marry and start a family may heighten the costs associated with involvement in terrorism and provide alternatives outside the group thereby causing disengagement (Abuza, 2009; Noricks, 2009; Harris, 2010; Alonso, 2011; Reinares, 2011). Indeed, some deradicalization programs, including Saudi Arabia's, promote reintegration into society by helping participants find a spouse (Mullins, 2010; Lankford & Gillespie, 2011).

Positive interactions with moderates. Positive ties to moderate individuals may reinforce mainstream ideals and cause individuals to question their involvement. Such ties also provide alternative social relationships outside the group. Jacobson (2008: 3) noted Al-Qaeda terrorists 'who maintained contact with family and friends outside the organization were more likely to withdraw'. In a study of former militants, Garfinkel (2007) similarly discovered relationships with mentors and friends who supported peaceful behavior were critical to their transformations.

Financial incentives. Similar to stable employment or an education, financial incentives reduce members' dependency on terrorist groups, making exit more likely (Barrett & Bokhari, 2009; Abuza, 2009). Indeed, terrorist rehabilitation programs often provide participants with financial incentives in the form of a stipend or housing.

Amnesty. As individuals involved in terrorism may fear imprisonment, being pardoned for their offenses may be a critical pull factor (Della Porta, 2009; Mullins, 2010; Rabasa et al., 2010). However, Alonso (2011) cautioned that amnesty, like other social reinsertion methods (e.g. financial incentives), only facilitates disengagement once an individual has *already* considered exiting.

The push/pull framework provides a useful starting point for conceptualizing and aggregating factors that may cause individuals to leave. However, the framework remains descriptive and underdeveloped. For instance, it is difficult to determine why a certain push or pull factor may cause some terrorists to leave, but not others. Further, how do multiple, interacting push and pull factors influence the likelihood of disengagement? Are there less common push/pull factors not noted in Table I that matter for *certain* terrorists, but not most terrorists? Finally, the framework says little about *how* individuals leave their terrorist role. What psychological processes are involved, and what are some potential barriers to exit?

Lessons from psychology, sociology, and criminology

Rusbult and colleagues' (Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Farrell & Rusbult, 1981; Rusbult & Farrell, 1983) investment model from psychology and Ebaugh's (1988) sociological research on voluntary role exit provide fruitful starting points for a more comprehensive understanding of terrorist disengagement. We review both below.

Rusbult's investment model
An extension of interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), the investment model incorporates traditional exchange theory constructs (c.f. Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961) according to the following formula:

$$\text{Commitment} = \text{Satisfaction} - \text{Alternatives} + \text{Investments,}$$

where Satisfaction = Actual(Rewards − Costs) − Expected(Rewards − Costs).

The model distinguishes between two components associated with individual involvement with an entity: satisfaction and commitment. *Satisfaction* reflects how positively one evaluates the target entity, whether a job, relationship, group, etc. The model suggests satisfaction increases to the extent that the entity provides high rewards and low costs, which surpass one's expectations or comparison level.

Satisfaction is important because it increases commitment (Rusbult, 1983). *Commitment* refers to the probability one remains in a job, relationship, group, or organization and feels psychologically bound to it (Rusbult & Farrell, 1983). Low satisfaction, however, does not ensure low commitment. Commitment is a more complex, multifaceted concept given it is shaped by two additional variables: *alternative quality* and *investment size* (Farrell & Rusbult, 1981). The investment model suggests commitment increases when people perceive poor alternatives to involvement and have invested heavily in involvement. Investments may be intrinsic (i.e. resources invested such as time, energy, money) or extrinsic (i.e. resources tied to involvement, including friends, material objects, memories).

Thus, terrorists who derive high rewards (e.g. sense of achievement, social bonds) and low costs (e.g. little intragroup conflict, few perceived threats) from their role, which exceed their expectations for that role, are likely to be highly satisfied. Higher satisfaction increases commitment to one's group. Low satisfaction, however, may not result in exit given commitment (or the probability one remains) is also a function of the quality of alternatives (e.g. stable employment, a supportive family, marriage opportunities) and investments, or sunk costs, in the organization (e.g. friendships, time and energy, perceived threats for exiting).

Importantly, the investment model incorporates the role of emotions in sustaining or terminating involvement (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998). High emotional costs associated with involvement may generate dissatisfaction and precipitate exit, whereas

positive emotions may create rewards or affective bonds, which increase satisfaction and sustain involvement. For example, the negative emotions a suicide bomber experiences when seeing a young child just prior to detonation may increase the costs associated with involvement (perhaps, instantaneously), generate dissatisfaction, and lead to disengagement (c.f. Speckhard, 2013) even though he or she may continue to believe in the group's underlying ideology.

Rusbult's model has several advantages that make it applicable to understanding individual disengagement decisions across social roles, including the terrorist role. First, unlike stage models, which assume people move sequentially through a series of distinct phases before exiting, the investment model offers a more flexible approach that recognizes the complexities underlying human decisionmaking. Second, the model is well regarded by psychologists and enjoys a rich research tradition, with a number of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies supporting its core tenets (Rusbult, Agnew & Arriaga, 2012; Le & Agnew, 2003). The model was tested initially in the context of interpersonal relationships including romantic relationships (e.g. Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Johnson & Morrow, 1986), friendships (e.g. Rusbult, 1980; Lin & Rusbult, 1995), and abusive or non-voluntary relationships (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). However, recent research demonstrates its applicability in non-relational domains (Le & Agnew, 2003), including with regard to one's commitment to a work organization (e.g. van Dam, 2005; Rusbult et al., 1988), music, sport, or hobby (e.g. Koslowsky & Kluger, 1986; Raedeke, 1997; Carpenter & Coleman, 1998), university or school (e.g. Geyer, Brannon & Shearon, 1987), and even the war on terror (e.g. Agnew et al., 2007). A meta-analysis by Le & Agnew (2003) of 52 studies, totaling 11,582 participants, found strong support for the investment model, with satisfaction, alternative quality, and comparison level explaining more than two-thirds of the variation in their measure of commitment, which was strongly associated with documented stay/leave behavior. Finally, tests of the model revealed individual differences (e.g. need for cognition, self-esteem) played no or only a very minor role in influencing the likelihood of exit (Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998).

A key weakness of Rusbult's model is that, in isolation, it only offers insight into one's likelihood of exit at a given point, or window, in time. Using the model alone, it is difficult to discern the dynamic ways in which events over the life course interact to shape leave decisions. Further, the model says little about how individuals leave or what the exit process, in contrast to the exit decision, entails.

Ebaugh's role exit theory

Ebaugh's (1988) theory of voluntary role exit describes a more dynamic, but linear, process by which people leave a social role. While we have strong reservations regarding the linearity of Ebaugh's stage-based approach, we introduce her theory as it provides a more lucid depiction of the dynamic psychological processes and cuing behavior commonly involved in exiting a role. Further, Ebaugh's theory shares common elements with Rusbult's investment model, including the importance of satisfaction, investments, and alternatives in shaping leave decisions.

Based on 185 in-depth interviews with individuals who previously identified with various roles (e.g. spouse, clergy, prostitute, alcoholic, convict), Ebaugh noted the process of exiting rarely occurs as a result of one sudden decision and often originates long before one is fully aware of what is happening or where events and decisions will lead. The process begins with a series of *initial doubts*, which cause individuals to question and reconsider their role. This stage is marked by the reinterpretation of role requirements and judgments regarding the perceived costs and benefits of meeting the role's demands. This doubting process tends to be gradual and marked by feelings of dissatisfaction, rather than specific knowledge of its cause. Ebaugh suggested that while some may never proceed past this doubting stage, others occupy it for years and still others may proceed through it rapidly. Yet, at some point, all individuals emit cues suggesting to themselves and others that they are dissatisfied.

Once individuals admit dissatisfaction, they begin *seeking and weighing alternatives*. Although this stage is sometimes systematic and deliberate, in other instances it is spontaneous and emotionally charged. In all cases, individuals seek and evaluate alternative roles relative to their present situation. These mental calculations are often influenced by moderating factors, including the transferability of one's skills and the existence of 'side bets' or sunk costs (e.g. status, friends, retirement benefits) that accrue over time and bind one to the current role. Individuals may begin evaluating different roles by 'trying them on', what Ebaugh termed 'anticipatory socialization'. Cuing behavior becomes more conscious as individuals focus on actions indicative of discontent.

Individuals with viable alternatives may enter the *turning point* stage and decide to exit. A turning point reflects an event that mobilizes and focuses awareness that one's prior lines of action are disrupted and no longer satisfying – prompting the individual to pursue something different. This phase is often accompanied by an external indication (e.g. handing in a job resignation) that one has formally decided to leave. An external

indication may reduce cognitive dissonance by allowing one to work through remaining doubts. While feelings may vary from fear and anger to elation and euphoria once one has left, this phase is often marked by a vacuum-like experience that entails a feeling of being in 'mid-air' and 'rootless'.

Finally, in the *post-exit* phase, individuals must construct a new identity that integrates their new and prior roles. 'Exes' must cope with the challenge of disidentifying with their previous role, while dealing with individuals who continue to associate them with their prior identity. Thus, this stage is marked by significant adjustments to self–other interactions, such as learning how to effectively present oneself and 'ex' status (e.g. handling stereotypes), negotiating and establishing intimate relationships, shifting social networks, and relating to former group members.

A fundamental weakness of Ebaugh's theory is that no empirical research thus far validates the linearity of the stages. It is possible not all individuals experience every stage or in the order described. Further, it is likely the process is even more dynamic than implied by Ebaugh's model. Doubts, for instance, may shape individual behavior (e.g. interactions with others), life events, and perceptions of events, which in turn, may create more doubts, which further shape life events in a cyclical or, at least, interactive fashion. Indeed, psychologists (e.g. Rape, Bush & Slavin, 1992; Littell & Girvin, 2002) have critiqued stage-based theories for imposing artificial categories, which oversimplify what are likely continuous processes. Even Ebaugh (1988) warns the retrospective reporting of one's decision to leave a social role may be biased as, looking back, individuals may rationalize an emotionally driven process. Thus, while we are fundamentally at odds with Ebaugh's characterization of the exit process as linear stages, her research highlights the importance of understanding how individuals go about leaving a social role, including some of the emotions and cuing behavior likely to be involved.

Related research across social roles

We now review the literature on criminal desistance, disaffiliation from NRMs, and commitment and turnover in work organizations. Our aim is two-fold: first, to demonstrate the utility of Rusbult and Ebaugh's research for understanding stay/leave behaviors across various social roles and related organizations, and second, to identify key insights from these literatures that can further inform our understanding of terrorist disengagement.

Despite differences between terrorist groups, criminal organizations, NRMs, and work organizations, there are some similarities that allow for meaningful comparisons (Bovenkerk, 2011; Harris, 2010; Mullins, 2010; Rabasa et al., 2010). First, terrorist groups, criminal organizations such as gangs or organized crime rackets, and deviant NRMs all combine aberrant behavior, to varying degrees, with an organized and cohesive structure (Bovenkerk, 2011). These organizations are often comprised of members with unconventional worldviews and generally require members to 'break all ties with their family and friends and leave the conventional world behind' (Bovenkerk, 2011: 264). With regard to criminals and terrorists, Mullins (2010: 181) noted 'they show similar systems of social influence and organization, they show similar pathways into their respective illegal activities; and their specific sense of social identity is also important'. Second, most terrorists, like criminals and members of NRMs, become involved in their youth (Bovenkerk, 2011). Moreover, with the exception of NRMs, most recruits are male and most have shortened life spans. As such, these related literatures may explain why young individuals, and males in particular, become disillusioned and disengage. Third, terrorist groups, criminal organizations, and NRMs impose significant constraints (e.g. initiation rituals, sanctions, branding with tattoos) that make leaving difficult. Harris (2010) noted radical groups ensure members are socially and psychologically invested in the ideology and employ socialization practices to inhibit withdrawal. As such, once individuals have joined, and burned all bridges to the outside world, it is difficult to leave (Bovenkerk, 2011). Finally, criminals, terrorists, and members of NRMs are, to varying degrees depending on domestic and international law and policy, pursued and/or punished for their aberrant behavior.

Yet, there are also key differences. One significant distinction between terrorists and criminals is that most terrorists feel they represent a wider collective; they believe they hold altruistic, politicized motives meant to benefit society and are more ideologically motivated in their use of violence (Mullins, 2010; Bovenkerk, 2011). Thus, terrorists may be less prone to disengagement than members of an organization lacking a strong ideological element (e.g. a criminal gang) or their reasons for leaving may be somewhat different (Noricks, 2009). Members of NRMs, like terrorists, are often deeply committed to the group's ideology, but many NRMs are not violent. A second difference is that criminals tend to come from lower socio-economic classes, while terrorists and members of NRMs are often drawn

from the middle class and intellectual elite. Thus, the case might be made that those in the latter category have very different motivations (e.g. religion, politics) than those in the former (e.g. poverty) for joining and leaving. Third, while psychopathy and mental illness are relatively rare among members of terrorist groups, about one-third of criminals suffer from mental disorders (Mullins, 2010).

Traditional work organizations differ in that they usually lack a deviant or strong ideological component. Nevertheless, the literature on employee commitment, withdrawal, and turnover from industrial and organizational psychology provides valuable insights as to how individuals' expectations about their role and experiences in any organization shape the likelihood they will leave. We now explore these issues in greater detail within their respective contexts.

Desistance

Consistent with Ebaugh (1988), criminal desistance is conceptualized as a *process* by which individuals arrive at a state of criminal cessation (e.g. Laub & Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001), rather than a static event. Fagan (1989) described desistance as a reduction in frequency and severity of offending, leading to 'true desistance' or actual 'quitting'. Weitekamp & Kerner (1994) defined desistance as a decline in the frequency, variety, and severity of offenses committed until *termination* (i.e. permanent cessation). Bushway et al. (2001) suggested desistance reflects a gradual social transition, similar to Ebaugh's concept of disidentification, involving a real change in how individuals interact with their worlds. Laub & Sampson (2001) viewed desistance as a gradual transition out of criminal behavior that includes a change in personal identity, which may occur well past termination. Farrall & Maruna (2004) differentiated between *primary desistance*, or a lull in criminal activity, and *secondary desistance*, which is characterized by the permanent cessation of crime and a change in personal identity. Maruna (2001) suggested secondary desistance involves criminals 'making good' on their past and, similar to Ebaugh, crafting a new pro-social identity for themselves that incorporates, rather than denies, their previous role as an offender.

Research overwhelmingly suggests desistance from crime depends, in large part, on the development of pro-social bonds; that is, meaningful attachments and behavioral investments in conventional others who encourage criminals to conform to social norms and provide them with incentives not to deviate (e.g. Meisenhelder, 1977; Virgil, 1988; Horney, Osgood & Marshall, 1995; Sampson, Laub & Wimer, 2006). Consistent with

the investment model and certain 'pull' factors related to terrorist involvement (i.e. marriage, employment), these bonds increase the quality of alternatives to crime. Such bonds may also promote a shift toward a more pro-social identity and deplete the satisfaction individuals obtain from criminal activity.

Just as moderate individuals may foster one's disengagement from terrorism, research suggests building and maintaining relationships with individuals who support and reinforce non-deviant behavior is vital to constructing a non-criminal identity (Baskin & Sommers, 1998). Hughes (1998) found the development of pro-social ties, especially to a dedicated mentor, were critical to decisions to desist. In a review of the literature, Laub & Sampson (2001) noted social support was crucial not only for criminal desistance, but also for terminating problematic behaviors such as alcoholism, smoking, and opiate use. Virgil's (1988) ethnography of youth gangs in Chicago and Los Angeles similarly found individuals who had left had developed bonds to other, pro-social institutions (most notably, their family or career). Decker & Van Winkle (1996) pointed to the absence of a 'receiving group' as a significant barrier to establishing a new identity, achieving a sense of belonging outside the group, and obtaining protection from potential reprisals.

Research on desistance stresses the importance of stable employment, marriage, and family as the primary means of establishing conventional, pro-social bonds (Laub & Sampson, 2001). In their age-graded theory of informal social control, Laub & Sampson (1993) underscored the importance of certain salient life events and pro-social ties in mitigating criminal trajectories set in motion during childhood. Their central thesis is that these social bonds create a sense of obligation and restraint that exert costs and consequences for continued criminal involvement. Holding a job, getting married, or having a family may change routines and patterns of association, resulting in lower exposure to deviant others (Warr, 1998). Further, crime becomes more costly as social patterns shift and one assumes new competing roles. Indeed, empirical research finds marriage and employment are stable predictors of criminal and gang desistance (e.g. Horney, Osgood & Marshall, 1995; Laub, Nagin & Sampson, 1998; Warr, 1998; Virgil, 1988; Sampson, Laub & Wimer, 2006).

Related, criminologists have shown offending declines and often ceases with age (Glueck & Glueck, 1943, 1968; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). Yet, they disagree as to why (Moffitt, 1993). In their research on gangs, Thornberry et al. (2003) suggested maturation was associated with the

acquisition of new responsibilities, including a family and a job, which prompted exit (see also Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). Just as terrorism scholars have pointed to the fatigue associated with maintaining a terrorist lifestyle, Hoffman & Beck (1984) suggested the relationship is due to the existence of an age-related 'burnout' phenomenon among criminals. Shover (1985) maintained, somewhat differently, the older offenders get, the more able they are to make calculated decisions and desist, benefiting from prior experiences – a point that may hold true for seasoned terrorists as well.

Disaffiliation

Similar to the literature on desistance, research on disaffiliation[1] from NRMs distinguishes between *behavioral* and *attitudinal* changes. Aho (1988) discusses disaffiliation from NRMs along a 'social-communal' and a 'belief' dimension. While the former focuses on how ties to a group are severed, the latter concerns renouncing its creeds and doctrines. Aho (1988) maintained the social-communal dimension is most important. The prototypical NRM apostate first severs ties to the group and, as this happens, the plausibility structure supporting his or her belief system crumbles. Jacobs's (1987) theory of disaffiliation followed a similar logic, with disaffiliation depicted as a two-step process in which individuals first sever ties to the group and then their emotional bond to the leader. Bromley (1991) likewise suggested disaffiliation is not simply triggered by loss of faith; rather, belief in the doctrine is often retained after individuals leave.

Indeed, disaffiliation from NRMs, like desistance, is conceptualized as a process that may occur over an extended period of time (e.g. Lewis & Bromley, 1983; Bromley & Shupe, 1986). In a synthesis of existing research, Bromley (1991) suggested individuals move through a series of stages that largely mirror those in Ebaugh's model. In the *disaffection* stage, one is confronted with dissatisfaction, which is managed for a period of time through various means, including repression, avoidance, rationalization, and redefinition (Skonovd, 1983). One may deny or ignore problems, contradictions, or inconsistencies (Wright, 1991). Moreover, when problems are episodic, rather than continuous, individuals can often maintain a sense of equilibrium, where negative experiences are balanced by ongoing rewards (Bromley, 1991). Wright (1984)

and Wright & Piper (1986) argued this first stage in the disaffiliation process is marked by the disruption of the group's 'plausibility structure'. Individuals begin to consciously recognize problems, leading to cognitive dissonance, and a more critical assessment of the group and one's participation in it (Wright, 1991).

Once this 'plausibility structure' is disrupted, Bromley (1991) noted external factors such as responses from those inside and outside the group to visible dissatisfaction (e.g. concern, encouragement, sanction) play a significant role. Failures to fully reintegrate the individual often result in group members' deep disappointment and even antagonism toward the wayward member (Bromley, 1991). This only serves to further deplete the satisfaction obtained from membership and increase the attractiveness of alternatives outside the organization. Indeed, Wright (1983) argued that the disaffiliation process is initiated by the 'discovery' or 'induction' of some kind of 'dissonance', which is powerful enough to result in one's adoption of an alternative reference group (e.g. family, career, alternative religion) to resolve the dissonance (as opposed to seeking some kind of resolution). Nevertheless, members may experience tremendous anxiety and fear of starting anew (Wright, 1991). Some NRMs demand greater investments, such that leave-taking decisions may be more momentous and repercussions more consequential (Wright, 1991).

According to Bromley (1991), dissatisfied individuals may then experience the second stage, whereby a *precipitating event* initiates separation. Similar to Ebaugh's seeking and weighing alternatives and turning point stages, this event crystallizes and symbolizes the individuals' dissatisfaction, energizing them to pursue a new direction (Bromley, 1991) and explore strategies of leaving (Wright, 1984). Wright (1991) suggested defectors plan, plot, and design their departures, often over many months.

Finally, individuals move into a *separation* stage, where they have formally exited the group and may face a period of personal turmoil (Lewis & Bromley, 1983). Successful readjustment into mainstream society depends on the extent of individuals' investments in the group and length of membership (Bromley, 1991). Individuals must adjust to the outside world and confront lingering doubts and ambivalence about leaving, feelings of loss with respect to personal relationships left behind, guilt over the pain caused to loved ones, and possible skepticism toward accepting conventional beliefs that only recently had been condemned (Lewis & Bromley, 1983). Consistent with Ebaugh's 'resocialization' stage, individuals often feel caught between two social and

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[1] The literature on NRMs uses defection, deconversion, and disaffiliation to refer to the process of leaving. For consistency, we use disaffiliation.

symbolic worlds and must learn to fashion new lives by integrating themselves into conventional roles (Lewis & Bromley, 1983; Bromley, 1991).

Research on NRMs discusses the causes of disaffiliation in terms of push and pull factors, and the terrorism literature borrows in this regard (Bjørgo, 1997). Aho (1988) and Skonovd (1983) noted the probability of exiting a NRM is a function of the net balance of pushes (e.g. social disruption and isolation, interpersonal conflict) and pulls (e.g. career opportunities, affectional draws outside the group). Bromley (1991) argued, consistent with Rusbult's investment model, disaffiliation is likely when individuals believe the payoff (or net satisfaction) from remaining is no longer commensurate with the investment they make. Bromley (1991) further suggested shifts in group demands may encourage disaffiliation, given these changes may go too far for some and not far enough for others. For example, highly ideological and devoted members may grow disillusioned by decreased demands placed on group members – a situation that may presumably occur in terrorist groups. In contrast, increasing demands may push others past their comfort level and impose high costs, thus producing dissatisfaction and eventual disaffiliation. Indeed, Bromley (2004, 2006) found stringent dress restrictions and demands for individual self-sacrifice, including sexual relationships with leaders, prompted some to exit NRMs.

Similar to the literature on terrorist disengagement, frequently cited reasons for disaffiliation are disillusionment with group leaders and members, unmet expectations, and loss of faith in the underlying ideology. Skonovd's (1983) work on former members of high-demand NRMs identified interpersonal conflict as a key determinant shaping disaffiliation. Aho (1988) similarly reported feelings of disloyalty, betrayal, manipulation, and paranoia among members as reasons for leaving. In interviews with former members of Hindu NRMs, Jacobs (1987) found 45% left primarily because the NRM had failed to meet their emotional needs. Wright (1991) reported disaffiliation often occurred as a result of the group not living up to what individuals had assumed, expected, or hoped it would be. Wright (1991) further noted that, over time, members might grow to acknowledge problems, contradictions, or inconsistencies within the movement. This recognition results in cognitive dissonance, which moves one closer to an independent, critical assessment of the group as misguided. Indeed, disillusionment with the group's ideology has been found to predict voluntary exit across a variety of NRMs (e.g. Wright, 1983, 1984, 1987; Beckford, 1985; Bromley, 2004).

Disaffiliation, like desistance and terrorist disengagement, is also thought to stem from burnout and the pull of external, pro-social bonds. Based on interviews with former members of NRMs, Beckford (1985) discovered many left because they felt 'homesick' or guilty for abandoning relatives and friends. Wright (2007) cited emotional exhaustion as a key reason for leaving. In interviews with members of 17 NRMs, Jacobs (1987) found sustained contact with individuals outside the group was associated with leaving. Bromley (1991) pointed to occupational status as a key factor related to one's likelihood of leaving. According to Jacobs (1987), and consistent with Laub & Sampson's (2001) work on criminal desistance, conventional employment leads to the development of prosocial ties. Bromley (2004) and Wright (2007) noted, consistent with Rusbult's and Ebaugh's frameworks, even employment opportunities might help a dissatisfied individual leave by increasing the alternatives available outside of the group.

Although less often discussed, research on NRM disaffiliation suggests changes in one's marital or family status may play a critical role. Bromley (1991) found pulls related to sexual relationships, marriage, and family frequently alter one's expectations of the group and promote disaffiliation, particularly when one's partner is highly devoted to an alternative faith. While research indicates converts of NRMs rarely consider future conventional interests and responsibilities, given such cultural ideals are rejected in youthful protest (Wright, 1983), settling into a traditional marriage and establishing other conventional social bonds (e.g. stable employment, continuing education) later appear acceptable and even desirable goals for NRM members (Wright, 1987).

Turnover

Consistent with Rusbult's investment model, the industrial and organizational psychology literature links low job satisfaction with employee turnover. Models of turnover all suggest dissatisfaction initiates a causal process whereby employees initially experience thoughts of quitting, followed by search intentions, quit intentions, and turnover (Mobley, Horner & Hollingsworth, 1978; Hom et al., 1992).

Job dissatisfaction is commonly linked to unmet employee expectations (e.g. pay, promotion, supervisory style) (Porter & Steers, 1973). Recent research suggests newcomers' unmet expectations are related to lower levels of identification with the organization and job involvement

(Ashforth & Saks, 2000), higher distress (Nelson & Sutton, 1991), lower job satisfaction (Nelson & Sutton, 1991; Wanous et al., 1992; Turnley & Feldman, 2000), and higher voluntary turnover (Wanous et al., 1992; Pearson, 1995; Lance, Vandenberg & Self, 2000).

Similar to the literature on terrorist disengagement, research on work organizations also underscores the damaging effects of negative leader–follower and coworker relations. Indeed, toxic leader behavior (Thoroughgood et al., 2012) has negative self-reported effects on job satisfaction (Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2004) and workers' turnover intentions (Tepper, 2000). Likewise, acts of interpersonal deviance (Bennett & Robinson, 2000) between employees, including harassment (Bowling & Beehr, 2006), bullying (Vartia, 1996), and social undermining (Duffy, Ganster & Pagon, 2002), increase the probability of turnover.

Research suggests the dissatisfaction–turnover link is moderated by three different forms of organizational commitment: affective, continuance, and normative (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer et al., 2002). *Affective commitment* refers to one's emotional attachment to an organization, which entails: (1) a strong belief in the organization's goals, (2) a willingness to exert considerable effort on its behalf, and (3) a strong desire to maintain membership (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Individuals who genuinely believe in the organization's vision and perform their daily tasks because they inherently want to (not because they feel they have to) hold high levels of affective commitment. Consistent with Rusbult's investment model, affective commitment creates rewards that may counteract the effects of negative events that spur job dissatisfaction and initiate turnover (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

Continuance commitment refers to the costs associated with leaving an organization (Porter & Steers, 1973; Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer, Allen & Smith, 1993). Continuance commitment is a function of two factors: (1) the 'sunk costs' individuals accrue, and (2) beliefs about the available alternatives (Hom et al., 1992; Meyer et al., 2002). The concept of continuance commitment maps clearly onto Rusbult's discussion of investments and Rusbult's and Ebaugh's incorporation of alternative quality. Individuals with high continuance commitment may believe they cannot 'afford' to sever ties with the organization because of, for instance, financial loss, the termination of social relationships, or, often in the case of terrorist groups, reprisal or imprisonment.

Finally, individuals who possess a strong *normative commitment* to an organization may remain despite high levels of dissatisfaction because they feel an obligation to serve (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer, Allen & Smith, 1993). Normative commitment may stem from socialization practices employed by the organization to deter exit, which result in high investments, as well as family, community, or cultural expectations that impose constraints on leaving and the alternatives available (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990).

Applications to the terrorist domain

Our review highlights the utility of a multidisciplinary approach in lending new insights to the study of terrorist disengagement. We find evidence of the key components of Rusbult's model in the literature on desistance, disaffiliation, and turnover. Rusbult's investment model succinctly captures *why* the likelihood of disengagement changes over time, while still allowing for individual differences in, for example, how much satisfaction one obtains from involvement and why (e.g. ideological commitment, social bonds, penchant for violence), the alternatives available, and the investments incurred. Thus, the investment model moves beyond the push/pull framework and explains why certain pushes and pulls cause some individuals to disengage from terrorism, but not others. An ideologically motivated terrorist satisfied with involvement, for instance, is less likely to be persuaded to leave by amnesty, financial incentives, or new opportunities than a deeply dissatisfied individual or one whose satisfaction with membership hinges on opportunistic gains. The model also elucidates why pushes and pulls may be more or less effective in precipitating disengagement at certain points during an individual's life course as satisfaction, alternatives, and investments vary. Thus, the model accounts for normal aging-related changes in roles and goals (e.g. desire to have a family), burnout, or a greater ability to make calculated decisions, which are highlighted in the literatures on desistance and disaffiliation from NRMs and may apply in the terrorist context.

Importantly, with regard to terrorism, the investment model could allow researchers to consider how variations at the macro level in, for instance, state features and policies, interact with group and individual-level characteristics to influence the likelihood of disengagement at the aggregate level. Certain state policies to combat terrorism, for instance, may increase the costs associated with membership (e.g. death, imprisonment). At the same time, repressive policies may make individuals more likely to support violence in the pursuit of their aims (Tilly, 1978; Tarrow, 1994). Variation in popular support for the cause or organization may shape the rewards

obtained from membership (e.g. honor, social status). Economic development, educational opportunities, and amnesty may increase the quality of alternatives available to individuals deeply dissatisfied with involvement. Further, differences across groups in the factors driving membership, internal relations, leadership, and the investments required, which influence the probability of exit or the factors likely to encourage exit, can be captured by the investment model.

A shortcoming of Rusbult's model is that it tells us little about *how* individuals exit. Although we disagree with Ebaugh's stage-based approach, her research and our review of related literature importantly highlight the psychological processes involved in leaving (e.g. anticipatory socialization, disidentification, cuing behavior). Attending to how individuals disengage (as well as why), we maintain, is critical for a comprehensive understanding of terrorist disengagement. Although further empirical investigation is warranted, it may be the process is often iterative and self-reinforcing so that certain factors associated with leaving (e.g. loss of faith in the ideology) influence the occurrence of other factors related to leaving (e.g. disagreements with members). Moreover, as individuals experience doubts, certain behaviors commonly associated with how individuals disengage, such as seeking and trying on new roles, may result in the development of pro-social ties or alternative social bonds, which further reduce the likelihood of continued involvement (i.e. the why). Simply listing the pushes and pulls for terrorist disengagement, while a useful start, tells us little about how the process unfolds, the role of individual predispositions, age-related changes, or the influence of variation in state- or group-level characteristics and policies.

Conclusion

While Rusbult's investment model, aspects of Ebaugh's theory of voluntary role exit, and the literature on criminal desistance, disaffiliation, and employee turnover deepen our understanding of terrorist disengagement, these frameworks and findings need to be validated within the context of terrorism. Nevertheless, they provide a useful foundation for thinking about how we approach and conceptualize terrorist disengagement and generating hypotheses. They highlight the importance of an approach flexible enough to capture how differences at the individual, group, and macro levels interact to influence the likelihood of disengagement at the individual or aggregate level. They also demonstrate that a greater understanding of why individuals disengage is likely contingent upon a deeper comprehension of how

they disengage. Scholars could investigate, for instance, whether push factors are more important during the initial stages of the disengagement process, with pull factors playing a larger role once disillusionment has set in as suggested in the disaffiliation literature (e.g. Wright, 1984; Wright & Piper, 1986). Related, recent work on the investment model (e.g. Le & Agnew, 2003) indicates satisfaction may be more pivotal in predicting exit than alternative quality. It would be useful to know if this is true in the context of terrorism. The policy implications of greater knowledge of the terrorist disengagement process are numerous. We have yet to ascertain, for instance, if amnesty and financial incentives matter at all, only once disillusionment has set in, or if such measures are effective in pulling out individuals whose involvement is primarily motivated by opportunistic gains. Further, despite its immense importance, we do not know whether or how changes in counterterrorism policy influence the likelihood of exit. We also do not know whether certain policies are more effective in encouraging disengagement among certain types of members or certain types of groups. These are just a few important questions ripe for empirical testing. While our review should be tempered by the differences we note across social roles and the need for increased empirical attention to the terrorist disengagement process, we hope this effort provides a foundation and impetus for researching a challenging but important phenomenon.

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