The Social Ecology of Homegrown Terrorist Radicalization: Identity and Religion

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Background

- comparative analysis – cults/new religious movements (NRMS) and homegrown terrorist radicalization (Dawson 2010)
  - who joins, how, and why
  - mechanisms and processes of commitment
  - why some NRMs become violent (apocalyptic beliefs, charismatic leadership, social encapsulation)
- internal dynamics similar and source of extremist behaviour
- fields share common set of conceptual/methodological problems:
  - explanatory gap problem
  - primary data problem
  - irrational/rational dichotomy problem
  - religion problem
- interfere with addressing four sources of motivation for radicalization

The Explanatory Gap Problem

- the shared social profile of cult joiners and homegrown terrorists – “unremarkable”
- no psychopathology or personality type
- criminal risk factors do not apply
- likely role of social and moral relative deprivation
  - key and neglected role of moral relative deprivation
- sets trenchant need to answer “why” question!
- but macro findings and micro theories still create pools of potential converts and terrorists that are too large
- delineate necessary factors, but not sufficient

Irrational/rational Dichotomy Problem

- dominance of psychological and quasi-rational choice theory approaches
- psychopathology & brainwashing ruled out
- RCT has limited applicability – especially re: homegrown terrorism
- neither approach can cope with how ordinary young men come to believe:
  - own deprivation
  - solidarity with global ummah (vicarious traumatization)
  - utopian jihadist solution (and martyrdom)
- explanatory gap looms large!

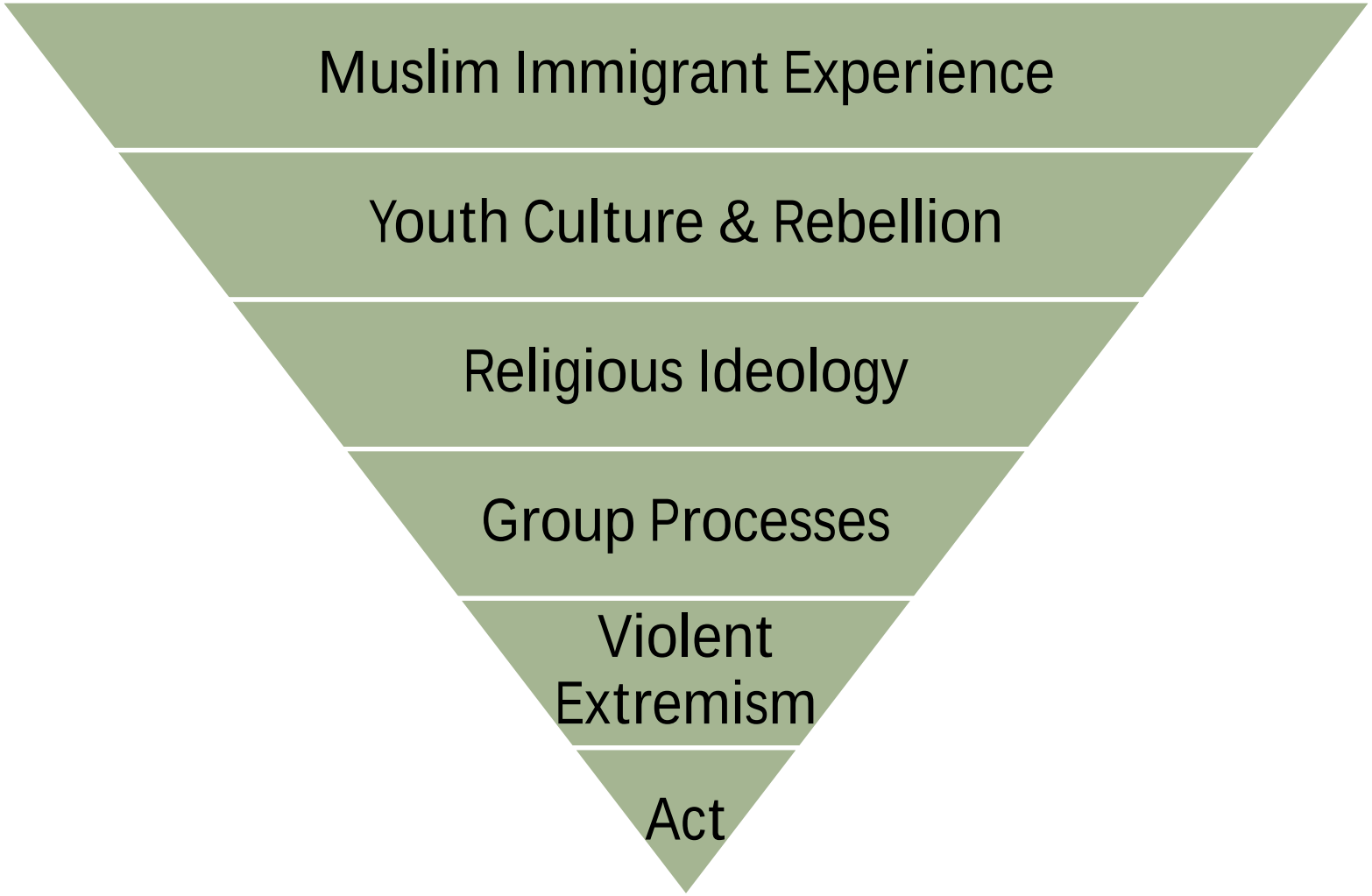
Religion Problem

- antipathy of psychologists and political scientists & discounting of primary motivational role of religion in research literature (with few exceptions)
- failure to come to grips with age-old functional linkages of identity, religion, morality, transcendence, fanaticism, and self-sacrifice
- & historical force of “alternative reality” of apocalyptic worldviews

Four Sources of Motivation for Radicalization

- the potential terrorist's reasoning is conditioned by:
  1) Muslim immigrant experience
  2) youth culture and rebellion
  3) millennialist ideology/worldview
  4) group processes
- all about identity issues!
- effecting role-person merger with radial group identity
- study as value additive process, systematically narrowing the explanatory gap

Value Additive Theory of Causes



More on Religion Problem

- role of religion acknowledged – but as post hoc rationalization
- What evidence for discounting motivational role?
- truncated discussions of religion (e.g., Silke, “Holy Warriors” 2008)
- widens explanatory gap (weak primary data for presumed social motivations; underplaying consistently strong primary data about religion)
- jihadists not religious because:
  - limited religious background
  - limited religious literacy
  - recent converts
  - turned to extremism too quickly
  - have political and other motives and goals
- but these observations **do not** speak to the “religiousness,” “sincerity,” or “significance” of the commitments