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PREDICTORS OF EXTREMISM IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Political extremism is on the rise in the United States. The FBI and Department of Homeland Security both cite domestic extremists as the single gravest threat to the nation's safety. Many individuals who embrace extreme ideologies do so when they are young, yet little is known about what factors may predict radicalization into extremism. This study assessed a sample of college students on their political beliefs and level of support for extremism and illegal acts in relation to radicalism. Additionally, it gathered data about their self-esteem, self-doubt, experiences of ostracism, and various demographic factors to assess which variables best predict an individual's level of extremism. While notable gender differences were found, as predicted, political beliefs – both conservative and liberal – were found to be the main drivers of extremism within the entire sample. Among male participants, ostracism and self-doubt were positively correlated with extremism and self-esteem was negatively correlated, whereas among female participants, only conservative political beliefs were correlated significantly with extremism. The relations among extremism, political beliefs, ostracism, and self-esteem require further research with careful attention to gender differences to understand the larger picture of what motivates college students toward extremism.

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Chapter 1

Literature Review

Defining Extremism and Related Terminology

The topic of extremism – defined as an adherence to a (usually) political or religious ideology that holds to positions more extreme than those which society deems acceptable (Kruglanski et al., 2017) – is currently enjoying a worldwide moment of popularity. In the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks perpetrated by Islamic extremists on the World Trade Center in 2001 and the subsequent invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the “war on terror” became a household term. Massive amounts of funding were channeled into addressing the threat of Islamic terrorism both on American soil and abroad (Jones, 2018). However, it is a lesser-known fact that beginning in approximately 2014, an increasing majority of violent extremist attacks in the United States have come from native-born terrorists rather than from al-Qaeda or Islamic sources.

In 2020, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security stated that “racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists – specifically white supremacist extremists – will remain the *most persistent and lethal threat* in the Homeland”; the FBI reiterated that statement (Jones et al., 2020). Complicating the study of domestic terrorism is the fact that much of it is perpetrated by individuals or small groups of people rather than by larger organizations which might be more easily detected. Instances such as the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, which claimed 168 lives and was masterminded by one man, illustrate just how urgent it is to identify extremist actors before they are able to perpetrate violence (Ebin, 2021; Jones et al.,

2020). The arrest of several militants who had formed a plot to kidnap and execute Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2020 is an example of successful tracking and apprehension of would-be terrorists at the federal level (Ebin, 2021; Jones et al., 2020).

Far-right extremism, in particular, has seen a dramatic uptick in the last two decades (Jasko et al., 2017; Jones, 2018). *Far-right* does not necessarily indicate affiliation with a particular political party; the vast majority of both Republicans and Democrats condemn acts of terrorism. Instead, it refers instead to a set of beliefs that include suspicion of governmental authority and its involvement in private life; resistance to social change; intolerance of political, social, or religious ideologies which differ from one's own; and often opposition to the integration of racial, ethnic, or religious minorities into society (Jones, 2018; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). Explanations for this phenomenon are plentiful, from the rise of the internet and subsequent advances in global communication to the election of the first black president, Barack Obama, in 2008 to the later election Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016 (Jones, 2018). While all these factors are doubtless important contributors to the problem, psychologists maintain that it is crucial to understand the psychological mechanisms that underlie an individual's tendency to radicalize and embrace extreme beliefs and behaviors.

The terms *extremism*, *radicalization*, and *terrorism* require careful definition for the clarity of this project. In much of the scholarly literature as well as public media there is a tendency to conflate the terms *extremism* and *terrorism*. One of the pitfalls of such careless use of language is that it misses the subtle distinction that not all extremism escalates to violence, but that non-violent extremism is still a threat to the societal well-being of a democracy because of the particular ingrown and inflexible worldview it fosters. Definitions of the aforementioned

terms vary across disciplines, but for most of the psychological and sociological research there are some generally agreed-upon parameters.

Extremism is a state of belief in which a person embraces an (usually political or religious) ideology to the exclusion of all others; this ideology must include positions that are beyond the bounds of what society on average deems ordinary and acceptable (Hogg et al., 2013; Kruglanski, 2018; Kruglanski et al., 2018). Not all extremism becomes violent, but in the special cases when extreme ideologies push a person or group to commit violence on behalf of a cause, it is called *terrorism* (Kruglanski, 2018; Kruglanski et al., 2014; McGregor et al., 2013).

Radicalization is the process by which an individual comes to accept increasingly extreme ideologies which may or may not culminate in violence (Borum, 2011; Kruglanski et al., 2014).

Significance Quest Theory

One social psychological theory that explains the individual process of being drawn into violent extremism is the Significance Quest Theory (Jasko et al., 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2018). The Significance Quest Theory (SQT) proposes that human behavior is driven by a quest for significance – the need to matter and be respected in one’s sphere of being. Further, the SQT proposes that all extreme ideologies that produce violence are precipitated by a loss of personal significance; that is, the individual or a group they identify with suffers a loss of significance (or the threat of such a loss) such as through humiliation, failure, loss, or abuse (Jasko et al., 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2018). When the quest to gain back the lost significance is triggered, it begins the process of radicalization. SQT divides the radicalization process into three overlapping but distinct parts – the need, the narrative, and the network (3N Framework) –

which will be addressed in detail in the following sections (Jasko et al., 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2014).

The Need

According to the SQT, the significance quest is triggered when an individual loses or is threatened with losing personal significance by suffering humiliation or having a member of their group humiliated, failure in jobs or relationships, loss of employment or resources, or some type of abuse. While these types of setbacks are unfortunately quite common in human experience, most people have the resources to adapt to losses in significance without turning to extremism; however, a small minority do not (Borum, 2011). This minority becomes consumed with the need to restore or avoid the lost significance to the point where the pursuit of that need will eventually crowd out other needs such as social approval, relationships, safety, and even the preservation of life itself (Jasko et al., 2020; Kruglanski et al., 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2018).

A newer addition to the SQT states that an individual may also be motivated to begin a significance quest for the promise of *gaining* significance rather than restoring lost significance (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Webber et al., 2017). One study of a database of suicide attackers found a strong positive correlation between the presence of a motivation to *search for* significance and the deadliness of the attacks they subsequently carried out. The same study also observed that attackers who were well-educated were more likely than those with less education to engage in violence for the promise of gaining significance rather than because of a loss (Webber et al., 2017). A different study found that sensation-seeking may mediate between the search for significance and willingness to engage in political violence; particularly in persons who have

thrill-seeking tendencies due to personality, violence may appear to be an exciting option for gaining significance (Schumpe et al., 2020).

The Narrative

The second factor in the 3N framework of radicalization is the extreme, violence-justifying ideology or narrative that the individual embraces as a solution for mitigating their significance loss. The ideology provides a compelling alternative framework that helps the individual make sense of reality by offering a set of beliefs about the self and its relation to society that are often black and white, and by suggesting violence as an appropriate way to gain significance (Kruglanski et al., 2018). The clearcut and often simplistic nature of extremist ideologies appeals especially to individuals who are seeking a way to manage uncertainty, which is discussed in more detail in a later section. The ideology may allow the person who has suffered significance loss to frame themselves as the victim and the injuring party as the enemy, creating an “us versus them” mentality (Borum, 2014). A person may form their own cohesive extremist narrative but more often it is presented to them already formed, embedded into a social network, which will be discussed next (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2018; Webber et al., 2018). One study indicated that commitment to extreme ideologies is stronger when an individual is in search of group, as opposed to personal, significance; therefore, they were more likely to choose violent means when seeking to restore group significance (Jasko et al., 2020).

The Network

The process of radicalization is rarely complete without the social component – the network of people and relationships who live out the extreme ideology and make it realistic and palatable to newcomers (Kruglanski et al., 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2018). One study found that the presence of radicalized friends (but not necessarily family members) increased an individual's likelihood of being radicalized to extremism, while having close friendships with non-radical peers was a strong protective factor against extremism (Jasko et al., 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2018). The study of cult behavior is closely tied to extremist studies. One group of researchers found that connections within the group serve not only to reinforce deviant ideologies but also to weaken ties with others outside the group while fostering intense within-group connections (Lofland & Stark, 1965).

People have been shown to be more likely to choose violence as a means to gain significance if they live in a violence-justifying social context – the more radical, the higher the risk for violence (Jasko et al., 2020). A strong sense of identification with the group that has suffered a loss of significance is associated with greater willingness to sacrifice for the group and, consequently, greater risk for violence (Kruglanski et al., 2014). A related study of illegal political behavior in teenagers has found that teenagers did not choose radical friends, but when a group of friends had been formed, they became more likely to engage in illegal behavior through the socialization of the group (Dahl & van Zalk, 2013); this finding is consistent with the results of other research indicating that group contexts tend on average to produce more extreme behaviors than when individuals act alone (Borum, 2011; McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008).

In Summary

The elements of the 3N framework are not a linear progression which an individual passes through in the order specified. The narrative component is not always present (at least on a conscious level), nor is violence always produced even when all three components are present (Borum, 2011); however, when the need, narrative, and network converge, the likelihood of violence is higher (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Because violence flies in the face of societal norms dictating what is appropriate, the decision to use violence as a means to significance must usually be reinforced by a complementary narrative and/or social network (Kruglanski et al., 2017). It is important to note that radicalization into extremism is a dynamic and individually diverse process, influenced by many factors that seem to shape-shift with time and culture. The 3N framework is but one of many possible perspectives on the issue (Borum, 2011; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2018). Vigilance in monitoring the significance-threatening issues in a society at all times is of utmost importance in understanding populations vulnerable to extremism.

The Role of Uncertainty

Uncertainty management is one of the possible mechanisms through which significance loss may lead to extremism (Hogg et al., 2013; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). An individual's capacity to process and manage normal uncertainty is believed to play a crucial role in deciding whether the scales tip toward radicalization; specifically, a loss of significance creates a state of uncertainty which the individual is motivated to resolve in some way (Kruglanski et al., 2018; McGregor et al., 2013; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). Inability to deal with ambiguity may

lead a person to search for black and white explanations for their suffering, of which extreme ideologies are a perfect example.

Despite extensive research attempting to prove otherwise, extremism has not been linked to mental illness in any way; however, psychologists have developed a profile that groups together some typical characteristics and vulnerabilities that predispose an individual toward extreme beliefs and behaviors (Borum, 2014; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). Those who are most vulnerable to extremism have a low tolerance for uncertainty and a high need for cognitive closure in the most simplistic and clear-cut way, choosing relief from the present uncertainty at the expense of more logical explanations; far-right ideologies are particularly attractive to these individuals because of their simplistic explanations of suffering through “victim and abuser” framing (Ozer & Bertelsen, 2018). When faced with uncertainty, a common reaction is to seek out others who feel the same, thus minimizing one’s contact with competing information and beliefs. This reaction serves a twofold purpose: it both strengthens the individual’s convictions through confirmation bias, and creates a vulnerability to extreme ideologies that play to the individual’s need for a simplistic explanation of the world rather than to rational thought (Hogg et al., 2013; McGregor et al., 2010; Webber et al., 2018). Neuropsychology weighs into the discussion, indicating that the brain’s natural processes of inhibition concerning violence can be overridden in situations where an individual is part of an extreme group with strong moral convictions about social issues (Workman et al., 2020).

There is a link between depression and violent extremism which researchers believe may be grounded in uncertainty. While further research is still needed to determine the exact nature of the connection, depression is believed to overlap significantly with negative future orientation – a feeling of hopelessness and lack of control over one’s own future – which could indicate a high

level of uncertainty and possibly trigger the significance quest (Borum, 2014; Hogg et al., 2013; Miconi et al., 2020; Rousseau et al., 2020). Negative future orientation may be connected to societal events such as economic and political developments, giving the significance loss a conveniently explainable cause. Recent studies of college students reveal steady and concerning increases in depression and anxiety as well as general psychological distress over the past decade, and this increase has correlated with a steep decrease in the ages of individuals involved in violent extremism (Miconi et al., 2020; Rousseau et al., 2020). More experimental research is needed to infer possible causal relationships between depression and extremism.

The Role of Self-Esteem and Ostracism

In keeping with the SQT's claim that all radicalization is motivated by a quest for significance, it should come as no surprise that self-esteem is another psychological factor that has been linked to extremism (Borum, 2014). One of the ways in which self-esteem may be damaged is through experiences of ostracism and rejection. A study of high school and college students indicates that deficiencies in life skills such as basic problem-solving and necessary skills for leading a successful adult life can leave students open to extreme ideologies, especially when coupled with moral disengagement (Ozer & Bertelsen, 2020). The correlation was particularly strong when students had suffered from poverty, early experiences of rejection by parents, and emotional detachment from caregivers. Profiles of school shooters indicate that many of them suffered ostracism before turning to violence which is "the great equalizer"; that levels the playing field may well be interpreted as an opportunity to restore self-esteem, and thereby significance (Kruglanski et al., 2017; Kruglanski, 2018).

A recent study of adolescents found that self-esteem acted as a moderator between ostracism and the participants' use of aggression; specifically, low self-esteem created risk for aggression in individuals who experienced ostracism, and self-esteem was negatively correlated with the frequency of exposure to ostracism (Li et al., 2019). People have also been shown to exhibit more aggression toward insults and rejection of a personal nature (which can be construed as a blow to their self-esteem) than when receiving general negative news about their lives, such as a misfortune involving property. Of note in this finding was that the aggression generated by the insult was aimed at anyone who happened to be in the vicinity, not just the deliverer of the insult (Twenge et al., 2001). The generalizing of aggression in response to a loss of personal significance is a particularly pertinent consideration in the context of causes for political violence.

Study Rationale

The Western world is seeing a crisis of identity in adolescent and young adult populations fueled by rapid globalization, economic uncertainties, and shifting social norms (LaFree & Schwarzenbach, 2021). Increasing numbers of these young people are at risk of turning to extreme ideologies – violent or otherwise – for stability and uncertainty-management. College age is a crucial point of influence to gauge and reduce students' risk of adopting extreme ideologies, given that the average age of extremists in the United States is 34 years, somewhat older than the global average (LaFree & Schwarzenbach, 2021; Miconi et al., 2020; Rousseau et al., 2020).

Given the rise in violent extremism the United States has seen in recent years, it is imperative to gain more understanding of the psychological processes underlying radicalization in order to determine who is most vulnerable to extremism and how radicalization can be prevented. This study used a sample of college students to investigate whether past or present experiences of ostracism were related to the individual's sympathy for extreme ideologies and political positions; what role self-esteem played in the relation between ostracism and sympathy for extremism; and whether certain types of political beliefs indicated a risk for political extremism. Because little research regarding American college students' embrace or rejection of extreme ideologies exists, this research sought to test the following hypotheses:

1. Experiences of ostracism and extremism will be positively correlated.
2. Self-esteem will serve as a moderating variable between ostracism and extremism.
3. Levels of extremism will be predicted by conservative political beliefs.

Chapter 2

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited from September 29 – December 12, 2021, using the Penn State Berks subject pool on SONA Research Participation System and through additional students recruited from participating classes who self-selected to participate with their instructors' permission. A total of 113 participants took the study, and their mean age was 20.44 years and the standard deviation was 2.28. For the gender breakdown, 73 participants were female, 39 were male, and 1 declined to identify. The racial/ethnic makeup of the sample was as follows: 76 White, 16 Latino, 11 African American, 6 Asian-American, and 4 of some other race. 33% of the sample was affiliated with a religious organization: 37 Christian, 3 Muslim, and 2 Buddhist. The political affiliations of the sample were as follows: 38 Democrat, 27 Republican, 23 Unaffiliated, 19 Independent, and 6 Libertarian.

Measures

This study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, in accordance with requirements for research involving human subjects, and was approved on August 18, 2021. The research was conducted via an online survey on Qualtrics consisting of seven self-report measures and a series of demographic questions, all completed online at the participants' leisure through the survey platform Qualtrics. The measures are as follows:

Extremism Scale

This measure by consists of 14 items designed to assess extremist views. Created by Ozer and Bertelson (2018), this measure asks participants to respond to statements related to their views of society and culture on a 7-point Likert scale. Examples include “It is necessary to totally change the economic system that is the basis of society” and “Those groups in the society that don’t support the good and correct life should be deprived of their rights”. Results indicate the participants’ level of tolerance for extreme societal viewpoints. The Extremism Scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha = .72$ for this sample, while the alpha of the original measure was $\alpha = .92$.

PIARES*

The acronym stands for Proviolence and Illegal Acts in Relation Extremism Scale, which is an assessment of an individual’s tolerance for violence and illegal behaviors to reach an end perceived to be desirable. This measure, also by Ozer & Bertelsen (2018), consists of 6 statements presenting participants with hypothetical situations in which it might be acceptable to use violence to solve societal or personal problems, such as the following: “Using physical violence is the only thing that really works to create a new and better society” and “Using physical violence is the only thing that really works to prevent repression and assault of my people.” The participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statements on a 7-point Likert scale. The PIARES showed good internal consistency with a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha = .94$ for this sample, similar to the alpha of $\alpha = .92$ of the original measure.

Ostracism Experience Scale for Adolescents (OES-A)

This measure by Gilman et al., 2013) contains 18 items about the ways the participant has been treated by others, intended to determine whether the participant has experienced ostracism. Items include: “In general, others ignore me during conversation” and “In general, others do not return my calls or messages”. Several items are reverse scored. The participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always). The scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha = .91$ for this sample, consistent with the alpha of the original scale which was $\alpha = .93$.

Political Beliefs Scale

This measure consists of 18 items designed to measure 3 different constructs: Liberal, Moderate, and Conservative political positions (Webber et al., 2018). The statements address abortion, same-sex marriage, the economy, immigration, and firearms, and include the following: “All undocumented immigrants currently residing in the U.S. should be immediately deported to their home countries”; “All forms of abortion, including late-term abortions (performed during later stages of pregnancy) should be allowed”; and “The private sector and the government are each better at providing certain goods and services, and we need both.” Participants responded to the statements indicating their level of agreement with the statements on a 7-point Likert scale. The Liberal scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha = .75$ for the sample; the Conservative scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha = .79$; and the Moderate scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha = .62$ and was eliminated from the analyses because of insufficient reliability. Our reliability was consistent

with the reliability of the original scale which ranged from $\alpha = .83$ on the Conservative subscale to $\alpha = .66$ on the Moderate subscale.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

This measure (Rosenberg, 1979) contains 10 statements evaluating the participants' feelings about themselves, such as: "I wish I could have more respect for myself" and "I take a positive attitude toward myself." Several items are reverse scored. Responses were recorded on a 4-point Likert scale to indicate the participants' level of agreement with the statements. The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .87$ for this sample. The original scale had a Guttman coefficient of .92.

Self-Doubt Measure

This measure (Oleson et al., 2000) is similar to the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1979) but contains statements with a slightly different focus. The 8 statements measure the participants' belief in their own capabilities and attitudes toward failure and success and include: "I often wish that I felt more certain of my strengths and weaknesses" and "As I begin an important activity, I usually feel confident in my ability." Responses were recorded on a 6-point Likert scale indicating the participants' level of agreement with the statement. The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .85$ for the current sample. The original alpha for this measure was $\alpha = .79$.

Sympathies for Radicalisation [sic] Scale (SyFOR)

The final measure (Bhui et al., 2014) is designed to test participants' levels of sympathy for a variety of radical behaviors, including terrorism, use of violence to protect oneself or one's people, and military engagement. The 16 items include: "Please indicate your feeling toward people who do the following: Use violence, threaten to commit terroristic acts, use bombs to fight injustice," and so forth. Participants indicated their level of support for these actions on a 7-point Likert scale. The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .77$ for this sample, and the alpha for the original scale was $\alpha = .89$.

Procedures

The Penn State Berks subject pool consists of students enrolled in Psych100 who are required to participate in research being conducted by other students as part of their course work. Alternatively, they may choose to complete a different assignment for the same amount of credit. The students from the subject pool who chose to take the online survey self-selected it out of all the available projects to participate in. They were fully informed about the risks and benefits of the study beforehand, as well as about their right to discontinue participation at any time. Because no deception or risk of harm was involved, the requirement for written consent was waived and participants were informed that their choice to continue with the survey would be interpreted as consent to include their responses in the data.

Students from eight other Penn State Berks psychology classes were also recruited, with permission from professors. Instructors forwarded the students in their classes an email containing the recruitment materials and the link for the survey, as well as contact information

for the principal investigator. These students were promised extra credit at the professor's discretion for their participation and were also given the option of completing an alternative assignment created by the principal investigator for the same amount of extra credit. When the students selected the link to be taken to the survey, the process from that point on was identical to that of the students recruited from the subject pool.

The introduction page of the survey informed participants of their rights to privacy and confidentiality and explained the process for taking an online survey. They were told to expect to spend about 30 minutes completing the survey and were provided with contact information for the research team and the IRB in the event of questions or concerns. From there, if they chose to continue, they were taken to a screening question asking them to indicate their age. An answer to this question was required in order to proceed. Since it is illegal for participants under the age of 18 to complete this survey, those who selected "under 18" were automatically redirected to the end of the survey and saw a screen informing them that they did not qualify to participate. All other selections were permitted to continue to the next page of additional demographic questions.

The seven scales that comprised the survey were presented in a counterbalanced order and the questions within each measure were also randomized to eliminate bias resulting from ordering of questions. Participants were permitted to skip any question they felt uncomfortable answering without consequence, but if too many questions in any scale were missed, the responses for that participant were excluded from the data analysis.

At the end of the survey, participants saw a screen asking them to select the class for which they planned to receive credit for completing the survey. Those who selected "Psych 100" were prompted to submit their responses and informed that their participation was complete. Those who selected any other class were redirected to a separate survey where they entered their

student ID to receive credit from the appropriate professor. This arrangement prevented the researchers from identifying any of the students who participated and prevented their ID's from being linked to the survey responses. They were prompted to submit their information to complete their participation.

Data Analysis

After data collection was completed, a clean-up syntax was performed on the dataset in SPSS to eliminate incomplete responses, unnecessary variables, outliers, and to recode data for convenience of analysis where necessary. Reliability analyses using Cronbach's Alpha were conducted on each of the scales; one subscale of the Political Beliefs measure, the Moderate subscale, was eliminated for insufficient reliability. Descriptive statistics for the sample including age, gender, religious and political affiliations, and race were calculated as preliminary analyses. These demographic breakdowns were used to examine differences among demographic categories (i.e., male vs. female, religious vs. nonreligious) in their responses to the scale items. Correlations between each of the seven scales (including the Liberal and Conservative subscales) were calculated to test Hypotheses 1. A partial correlation was conducted to test whether self-esteem moderated between ostracism and extremism was conducted to test Hypothesis 2. Each of the scales were then entered into a regression model to assess which variables best predicted extremism, as a test of Hypothesis 3.

Chapter 3

Results and Analyses

Descriptive statistics were generated for male and female participants that included the means and standard deviations of all the variables of interest. A series of independent t-tests were conducted to assess differences between the means by gender and the significance of those differences using a corrective Bonferroni test of .01 to reduce the chance of a Type 1 error due to alpha inflation. A complete list of those statistics is included in Table 1 (see Appendix A). As the table indicates, no significant gender differences were observed for any of the variables of interest, with the exception of conservative and liberal politics. Men had significantly higher scores in conservatism compared to women; similarly, liberalism was marginally significant ($p = .053$), indicating that women were more liberal than men.

Correlations

In order to investigate Hypothesis 1 and to determine whether all variables were significantly related to the dependent variable (extremism), Pearson's Product Moment correlations were calculated for all variables separately for male and female participants. Variables included extremism, sympathy for radicalisation (SYFOR), proviolence and illegal acts in relation to extremism (PIARES), ostracism, self-doubt, self-esteem, liberal politics, and conservative politics. In the male participants, extremism was positively correlated with ostracism, $r(37) = .405, p = .019$, and self-doubt, $r(37) = .342, p = .033$; and negatively correlated with self-esteem, $r(37) = -.360, p = .024$. For the female sample, ostracism was correlated with PIARES, $r(66) = .261, p = .031$, and liberal politics, $r(66) = .407, p < .001$.

Conservative politics were correlated with extremism, $r(66) = .524, p < .001$, PIARES, $r(66) = .291, p = .015$, and self-esteem, $r(66) = .252, p = .037$. As seen in Tables 2 and 3 (see Appendix A), the hypothesis that experiences of ostracism and extremism would be positively correlated was partially supported as significant positive relations were found of ostracism for men but did not rise to the level of significance for women. Results concerning SyFOR and extremism demonstrated higher correlations for women compared to men, but neither was statistically significant.

Hypothesis Two suggested that self-esteem would serve as a moderating variable between ostracism and extremism. As evidenced in Tables 2 and 3, self-esteem was negatively related to extremism, $r(37) = -.360, p = .024$, and ostracism, $r(37) = -.548, p < .001$, for men, but self-esteem was not significantly correlated to extremism for women, $r(66) = .096, p = .438$; however, ostracism was negatively and significantly correlated at $r(66) = -.366, p = .002$.

A partial correlation was computed to examine whether controlling for self-esteem would change the relationship between extremism and ostracism, indicating a moderating effect. The results of that analysis showed that for men, the significant correlation was eliminated from $r(37) = .405, p = .011$ to $r(34) = .266, p = .106$, indicating that self-esteem serves as a moderator for the male sample. However, for women the opposite effect was observed. The relation between extremism and ostracism strengthened from $r(66) = .197, p = .107$ to $r(63) = .251, p = .041$ when self-esteem was removed.

Regression

A multiple regression model was computed using the enter method. The entire sample was entered into the regression model as one rather than splitting it by gender, for two reasons: there were no significant gender differences besides conservative politics, and the male sample was too small to yield reliable results. The dependent variable was extremism, and the predictor variables included the PIARES, ostracism, liberal politics, conservative politics, self-esteem, self-doubt, SYFOR, gender, and age. The model accounted for 44% of the variance in extremism within the sample, $R = .661$, $R^2 = .437$, $F(9, 97) = 8.376$, $p < .001$. Six variables significantly predicted extremism. As predicted by Hypothesis 3, the strongest predictors were conservative politics ($B = .351$, $p < .001$) and liberal politics ($B = .225$, $p = .001$), followed by self-doubt ($B = .220$, $p = .013$), gender ($B = .292$, $p = .026$), PIARES ($B = .166$, $p = .028$), and self-esteem ($B = .346$, $p = .030$).

Results of this study demonstrated that political motivations appear to be the main predictor for college students who hold extreme positions. Younger students expressed more extreme views than older ones, although age did not reach the threshold for significance ($B = -.049$, $p = .081$). There were significant gender differences in conservative politics as outlined in Table 1 (see Appendix A). Ostracism ($B = .163$, $p = .178$) and SYFOR ($B = -.034$, $p = .726$) also were not significant predictors of extremism in the whole sample.

Chapter 4

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

This study sought to test the Significance Quest Theory which is built on the premise that a loss of personal significance is often the catalyst for involvement in extremist activity. On all the variables studied, there were no significant mean differences between men and women with the exception of conservative politics, in which men were significantly higher. In liberal politics, women were higher, but the difference was only marginally significant. It was hypothesized, based on findings by Twenge et al. (2001), that ostracism and extremism would be positively and significantly correlated in our sample. The results supported that expectation, with the caveat that the correlation was much stronger for men than for women. In fact, results of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation showed no significant relationship for extremism and ostracism for the women in our sample. Based on the significance quest theory, this outcome is explainable by the fact that social rejection can be expected to cause a loss of significance, thereby triggering a quest for significance that may lead to the embrace of extreme ideologies.

A related result emerged in the testing of the second hypothesis, that self-esteem will serve as a moderating variable between ostracism and extremism (Li et al., 2019). This prediction was supported for men but was not significant for women. For men, removing the effect of self-esteem significantly reduced the correlation between ostracism and extremism while for women, controlling for self-esteem had the opposite effect to a much lesser degree. The expected outcome was that the presence of self-esteem would lead to a reduction in the

correlation between ostracism and extremism, which was strongly demonstrated for men but not for women. This finding provides evidence that self-esteem plays a much larger role in men's relationship to ostracism and extremism than in women's. It is worth noting here that the women in the sample were more politically liberal and the men more conservative, with both differences being significant. One could hypothesize that there is something in the nature of conservative politics that engages the sense of self-worth and identity, as in the men's case, which is not present in liberal politics. Additionally, for the women, ostracism was the strongest predictor of their liberal beliefs, indicating that there may be elements of liberal politics which appeal to those who have experienced marginalization.

Lastly, the hypothesis that conservative political beliefs would be a significant predictor of extremism (based on work by Borum, 2011) was supported for men and women. Beyond the hypothesis, however, an unforeseen outcome was that liberal political beliefs were almost as strongly predictive of extremism as conservative. This finding suggests that political motivations were the main predictor for college students' tendency toward extreme positions, whether they are conservative or liberal. Reasons for the strength of political views could vary widely. Current political events, as well as the strength of family values and political beliefs, may have a bearing on students' attitudes.

Limitations

There exist limitations that bear consideration when reviewing the results of this study. The first is that the sample size was small ($N=113$), and the majority of the participants were 18-19 years old. The size of the sample may have obscured results that would have been significant

in a larger sample with greater statistical power. While the purpose of the project was to study college students, the argument could be made that students' views will likely change and mature with each additional year of study. This sample, being skewed toward the freshman and sophomore demographic, may not necessarily be representative of the views of all students, especially in light of the fact that age was negatively correlated with extremism. Future research should also seek to include older college students. The sample was chosen to represent the 18-25 age group in American society, but as not all Americans in that group attend college, future research should investigate and compare extremism, ostracism, and self-esteem within the non-college-educated segment of young adults. There is reason to believe that young adults without a college education whose prospects of gainful employment are slimmer than those of the college-educated may be even more at risk for recruitment into extremist groups (Miconi et al., 2020).

Another limitation of the study is in the measures used. Both the Extremism and Political Beliefs measures are several years old and may not accurately reflect the most recent political and social trends. In addition, the Moderate Politics subscale of the Political Beliefs measure did not demonstrate high reliability and was eliminated from the study, potentially obscuring relevant results for persons whose political beliefs fall into that category. Therefore, future research should use updated and reliable measures that are tailored to the specific political environment of America today. The Ostracism measure was aimed toward an adolescent population slightly younger than our sample, and the results may have been more accurate if a version designed specifically for young adults had been used.

One final limitation arises from the reliability of the Extremism measure. On the original reliability test of the scale, the researchers computed a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .92$. On our sample, however, the reliability had dropped to $\alpha = .72$. The discrepancy may be due to sample

size or some other source of error in the data, but in any case, it is necessary to interpret the results of our study with that limitation in mind.

Conclusion

In conclusion, further research utilizing a larger sample is needed to determine the exact nature of the gender and political differences regarding ostracism, self-esteem, and extremism. The discussed findings have far-reaching implications for how college students may be expected to navigate the current politically fraught environment. With the increasing polarity of the two major political parties and the tendency of news sources to endorse a single political position, it is hardly surprising that young people feel the need to hold to political positions that may predispose them to extreme ideologies. College students are generally in tune with political events of the day and are likely to reflect the broader societal attitudes. As long as the political climate continues to be sharply divisive, continuing research will be necessary to determine what causes certain students to lean toward ideological extremes while others do not. By asking careful questions about the psychological consequences of our political structures, we may discover not only the roots of extremism, but also viable solutions to aid in the formation of a more civil and unified democracy.

Chapter 5

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Appendix A

Tables

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics by Gender

	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Extremism					
Women	68	2.91	.78	-.467	.641
Men	39	2.84	.78		
PIARES					
Women	69	1.63	.96	1.480	.142
Men	39	1.93	1.09		
SYFOR					
Women	70	2.83	.72	1.004	.318
Men	39	2.97	.71		
Ostracism					
Women	68	2.11	.60	.318	.751
Men	39	2.15	.56		
Self-esteem					
Women	70	2.92	.57	.791	.431
Men	39	3.02	.61		
Self-doubt					
Women	71	3.47	.93	-.833	.407
Men	39	3.30	1.12		
Liberal Politics					
Women	70	3.49	1.10	-1.953	.053
Men	39	3.05	1.14		
Conservative Politics					
Women	70	2.43	1.21	2.841	.005**
Men	39	3.11	1.19		

Table 2: Correlations for Male Participants

	SYFOR+	Extremism	PIARES++	Ostracism	Self-doubt	Self-esteem	Liberal Politics	Conservative Politics
SYFOR+	1.00							
Extremism	.07	1.00						
PIARES++	.37*	.36*	1.00					
Ostracism	-.08	.41*	.20	1.00				
Self-doubt	.01	.34*	.13	.46**	1.00			
Self-esteem	.12	-.36*	-.20	-.55**	-.80**	1.00		
Liberal Politics	.06	.17	-.10	.09	.22	-.17	1.00	
Conservative Politics	-.15	.25	.12	.16	-.03	-.19	-.58**	1.00

Note. *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

+ Sympathy For Radicalisation Scale

++ Proviolence and Illegal Acts in Relation to Extremism Scale

Table 3: Correlations for Female Participants

	SYFOR+	Extremism	PIARES++	Ostracism	Self-doubt	Self-esteem	Liberal Politics	Conservative Politics
SYFOR+	1.00							
Extremism	.15	1.00						
PIARES++	.57**	.34**	1.00					
Ostracism	.13	.20	.26*	1.00				
Self-doubt	.02	.03	-.00	.30*	1.00			
Self-esteem	-.17	.10	-.23	-.36**	-.62**	1.00		
Liberal Politics	-.04	.11	.12	.41**	.18	-.22	1.00	
Conservative Politics	.14	.52**	.29*	-.09	-.20	.25*	-.44*	1.00

Note. *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

+ Sympathy For Radicalisation Scale

++ Provience and Illegal Acts in Relation to Extremism Scale

Table 4: Regression Results Using Enter Method, Predicting Extremism

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	-.581	[-2.673 – 1.510]		-.552	.582
PIARES	.166	[.019 - .314]	.216	2.234	.028*
Ostracism	.163	[-.076 - .401]	.122	1.356	.178
Liberal Politics	.225	[.092 - .358]	.327	3.349	.001**
Conservative Politics	.351	[.232 - .470]	.565	5.855	<.001**
Self-esteem	.346	[.035 - .657]	.254	2.206	.030*
Self-doubt	.220	[.048 - .392]	.279	2.543	.013*
SYFOR	-.034	[-.227 - .159]	-.032	-.352	.726
Gender	.292 -.049	[.036 - .548]	.182	2.266	.026*
Age	-.049	[-.104 - .006]	-.145	-1.766	.081

ACADEMIC VITA

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EDUCATION

Bachelor of Arts in Psychology

The Pennsylvania State University, Berks Campus

To be Awarded May 2022

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Honors Thesis – Predictors of Extremism in College Students

- Designed and conducted under the supervision of Dr. Brenda Russell
- Recruited students from psychology and humanities classes to participate
- Thesis focused on ostracism, self-esteem, and political motivations as possible predictors of extremism
- Conducted descriptive and inferential statistics

Senior Research Project – Rate the Boss: Gendered Evaluations of Leaders

- Designed and conducted under the supervision of Dr. Catherine Mello
- Focused on how perceptions of gender roles influence evaluations of leaders' effectiveness in the workplace
- Conducted descriptive and inferential statistics

Relevant Coursework – Penn State Berks

- Elementary Statistics
- Basic Research Methods
- Advanced Research Methods
- Principles of Measurement

HONORS AND AWARDS

- Young Investigator Award (for honors thesis research) Spring 2022
- Member, Psi Chi International Honor Society in Psychology
- Dean's List, Penn State Berks Spring 2019 – Spring 2022
- Robert E. Newnham Trustee Scholarship 2019 – 2021
- Academic Achievement Award in Anatomy and Physiology 2018 – 2019

RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE

Psychiatric Technician, Wellspan Philhaven

May 2021 - Present

- Assist with patient care needs and safety observation
- Maintain the therapeutic environment within the psychiatric unit
- Intervene and de-escalate in behavioral crisis situations

Teaching Assistant, Penn State Berks

Jan. – May 2019

- Assisted professor in teaching anatomy concepts in the biology lab
- Assisted with quizzing students to assess understanding of concepts
- Met with students as requested to provide support and personalized assistance

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Volunteer Vocalist, Landis Homes Retirement Community

March 2020 – Present

- Perform musical numbers for services remembering the deceased

Service Trip, Los Angeles, CA

June 2015

- Prepared and served meals to groups of 100-200 at four homeless shelters
- Helped with cleaning, sorting clothes, and maintenance jobs at homeless shelters

PRESENTATIONS

“Predictors of Extremism in College Students,” Undergraduate Exhibition for Research, Inquiry, Creative Activity, and Engagement Experiences, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park PA, April 2022.

Honors thesis presentation – Penn State Berks Academic Achievement Awards Ceremony, April 2022.

CLEARANCES AND CERTIFICATIONS

- Updated federal, state, and Act 33 clearances
- First aid/CPR/AED certified
- Therapeutic Crisis Intervention (TCI) certified

TRAININGS

- Mandated reporter training (Act 126)
- Behavioral Response Management Training

SKILLS

- Computer: Proficient in Microsoft Office and SPSS
- Language: Conversational in French, proficient in English
- Documentation: Proficient in healthcare and behavioral health documentation