Chapter 11

# Militant Extremist Mindset

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## Abstract

Militant extremist mindset refers to a fixed set of beliefs that motivate people to engage in violent activities directed toward specific others. In our previous work we have identified three components that together define militant-extremist mindset and have been identified across different cultures. These are broadly known as nastiness, grudge, and excuse: nastiness represents anti-social and pro-violent attitudes; grudge is a feeling of animosity and resentment typically directed toward some other group which serves as a trigger for action; and excuse represents a higher-order justification for engaging in militant extremism. These “ingredients” of militant-extremist-mindset are defined more specifically according to the context and vary according to culture and setting. For example “excuse” typically represents a particular set of religious beliefs. Further empirical work may reveal whether this mindset is present to some extent in the general population. If so, these measures of militant-extremist mindset might be useful in assessing population-wide attitudinal changes or the effectiveness of anti-terrorist social interventions.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural, Extremism, Mindset, Terrorism

## Introduction

"Morality is personal. There is no such thing as a collective conscience, collective kindness, collective gentleness, collective freedom. ... To talk of social justice, social responsibility, a new world order, may be easy and make us feel good, but it does not absolve each of us from personal responsibility."

Margaret Thatcher,   
Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979 to 1990  
 (Draft notes for her address to the October 1979 party conference. In the end these comments were ignored by her speechwriters)

At the dawn of the 21st century, as reminders of the threat of terrorism become part of daily life for many—whether this be in the form of airport security measures, public transport announcements during the daily commute, or a failed bombing attempt on civilian targets—psychologists have turned their attention back to the darker aspects of human nature that attracted a lot of interest in the years following World War II. Positive psychology and the studies of happiness and well-being that were of interest to many in the 1980s and 1990s have given way to renewed attempts to understand what lies behind behaviours that lead people to commit acts of violence against their fellow human beings.

Our interest has been in the extremist (*fanatical*) mindset. A dictionary definition of *mindset* reads: “A fixed mental attitude or disposition that predetermines a person's responses to and interpretations of situations”. In our own previous work, it is defined as “a pattern of beliefs, feelings, thoughts, and motivations that tends to be mobilised under facilitating conditions” (see Stankov, Saucier and Knežević, 2010a). In his foreign-policy speech in Cairo, in June 2009, President Obama carefully avoided using the word “terrorism”, preferring “violent extremism” [[2]](#footnote-2), thereby emphasising both cognitive (“extremism”) and behavioural (“violent”) features of “terrorists”, rather than the effects (“terror”) of their activities.

We distinguish two types of extremism—benign and militant—and the focus of our work is on the latter. Much of our effort to date has been motivated by a desire to establish if the construct of *militant extremist* mindset (MEM) can be measured and, if so, whether: a) it represents an extreme level of the already known constructs and therefore can be measured in the general population, or; b) it is a characteristic of a small group of people who can be classified as standing outside the “normal” range. Since the evidence (described below) favors the first position, what are the main psychological ingredients of militant extremist mindset? In this chapter we shall provide an overview of the approaches used in our studies of MEM and summarise the main findings.

Consistent with Lady Thatcher's viewpoint, our approach to the study of MEM is psychological in nature and implies personal responsibility: the sources of MEM are within the individual. We assume that they can be measured by asking people to agree or disagree with statements that describe one's feelings towards other people, institutions and courses of action. Crucial, of course, is the choice of statements. They have been carefully selected to approximate those endorsed by people who have engaged in or supported violent activities. Similar procedures have been successfully used in studies of personality and related constructs.

### Nastiness, Grudge and Excuse

Our definition of MEM rests on a series of empirical studies that employ procedures of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. The outcomes of these studies have been described elsewhere (see Saucier, Akers, Miller, Stankov & Knežević, 2009; Saucier et al., (in press); Stankov, Saucier & Knežević, 2010a; and Stankov, Higgins, Saucier & Knežević, 2010b). The present chapter draws on the report of Stankov, Saucier & Knežević (under review). We refer to the three main factors that emerged from these studies as 'the ingredients of MEM' and name them *Nastiness*, *Grudge*, and *Excuse*.

#### a) Nastiness

In Stankov et al. (2010a), nastiness is captured by the factor labeled “War: Justification of violent acts”. In Stankov et al. (2010b; under review) nastiness is captured by the “Pro-violence” factor. The “War” and “Pro-violence” factors identified in our studies are conceptually identical—i.e., they both indicate the acceptance, justification and even advocacy of violence in dealing with enemies. We believe that high standing on this factor is not restricted to those prone to committing terrorist acts. The sub-population of people who have committed criminal acts (including those who have never been caught) is likely to have an elevated standing on this factor as well. In general, people do not agree with statements that capture Nastiness. The arithmetic means on a five-point Likert scale with 1 representing “strongly disagree” are slightly over 2 (“disagree”). Needless to say, there are group differences in the levels of endorsement, with males and some cultural groups’ (e.g., Korea, China) standing being somewhat higher than other countries included in our samples.

#### b) Grudge

The Grudge factors identified in our studies to date differ in terms of specificity. In Stankov et al. (2010b) this factor is somewhat narrow and it is labeled as “West: Sins of the Western nations”. Two themes are running through the items that define this factor. First, the West is seen as an aggressor that has committed violence against other countries in the world, implying that revenge against the West is acceptable. As I point out below, its narrow nature derives at least in part from the preponderance of Islamic groups in contemporary writings that reflect militant extremism. Second, the West is seen as morally rotten, and the statements that fall into this category can be interpreted as attempts to demonise the enemy. In Stankov et al. (2010a; under review) this grudge factor is not limited to the West and it reflects general dissatisfaction with the conditions in the world today (e.g., the world is heading for destruction and that human race is facing calamity). It is labeled as “Vile World”. In Stankov et al. (under review), however, the vileness of the world is also related to aspects of human nature (competitiveness, crisis of values), not to some general feature of the world we live in. Again, a common feature of all three factors identified in our studies is a grudge that may motivate some people to take action. Criminals (e.g., thieves or those committing homicides) differ from nasty “revolutionaries” with respect to Grudge, not in terms of Nastiness. Whilst criminals may hold a grudge, this might be more personal or localised – in contrast to the “revolutionary”, whose grudge is cast wider and is more socially oriented - Robin Hoods are rare in our societies. In agreement with the results from our other studies, the means of the Grudge items are around 3 on a five-point Likert scale and gender differences are not pronounced. Participants from two countries (Serbia and Malaysia) score relatively high and those from China score low on Grudge.

#### c) Excuse

The Excuse factor also takes different forms in our studies. All forms of it represent justifications in people’s own minds of the nasty and violent things they tend to condone. The items classified under the rubric of Excuse bring into focus higher moral principles and therefore imply noble motivation behind such acts. In Stankov et al. (2010b) the excuse factor is labeled as “God: In the name of God”. In Stankov et al. (2010a) the factor is labeled as “Divine Power”. In Stankov et al. (under review) this factor is labeled “Utopianism”. Since we see Excuse not to be restricted to religiosity, Utopianism may accommodate MEM groups with atheistic orientation. The three factors of Excuse are conceptually different, more so than factors of Nastiness and Grudge. Nevertheless, even though they invoke different sources of moral authority such as God or some kind of Divine Power or Utopian ideals, the common thread running through all these sources is a justification or an excuse. In the present context, higher moral principles that derive from spiritual power or from an idealistic goal of creating a better world represent an excuse for being proviolent and having a grudge. Again, in agreement with the results from our other studies, the means of the Excuse items are around 3 (neutral) on a five-point Likert scale. Although significant, the size of gender differences on this factor is small and in favour of females—females are slightly more likely to positively endorse statements with religious and idealistic overtones. The highest standing country on this factor in our studies is Malaysia, with Chile and Guatemala closely behind it.

Sometimes psychologists develop a theory about a particular construct and proceed with the development of measures of this construct only to find out that correlations between a new measure and some existing constructs are too high to warrant its usefulness vis-a-vis what is already known. In our work with MEM we have taken care to obtain correlations of our new measures and assessments of personality traits, value orientations, social attitudes and social norms all of which at least in theory, may have elements in common with MEM. Our findings are that the elements of Excuse with clear religious orientation (i.e., God, Divine Power and Utopianism) are substantially the same as traditional measures of religiosity. Measures of Nastiness and Grudge, however, cannot be reduced to other psychological constructs. This is not to say that they do not correlate in a meaningful way with other constructs. Thus, Nastiness (Pro-Violence) factor has moderate correlation with Saucier's Betaism (unmitigated self-interest and dismissal of political correctness) while the Grudge (Vile World) scale correlates with measures of Psychoticism and Social Cynicism.

## The Use of Ingredients of MEM Measures

One proposed use of these scales is for the detection of the levels of radicalization in the general population, particularly when a society is experiencing social and political upheavals (Stankov et al., 2010b; under review). It is to be expected that current items within each scale may need to be modified or supplemented by new statements appropriate for a particular society. Another area of potential application will be in assessing the effectiveness of currently popular de-radicalization efforts in several, mostly Muslim, countries that have been plagued by terrorism.

Group comparisons such as cross-cultural comparisons between and within countries on three ingredient processes of MEM may be useful for an improved understanding of cultural differences. This information can supplement commonly studied differences in noncognitive traits such as personality traits, values and social attitudes and norms. One area that has already shown promise is the similarity of MEM findings and studies of cross-cultural differences in noncognitive constructs other than those that belong to MEM. Two empirical findings are particularly relevant for our purposes here. Stankov (in press) and Stankov, Lee and van de Vijver (under review) show that countries and cultures can be ranked in terms of their standings on the Harshness vs Softness dimension. This dimension is defined by social attitudes like Toughness and Maliciousness on the Harshness side and by measures of personality like Agreeableness and Conscientiousness on the Softness side. Harsh countries are from the Confucian Asian region and soft countries are from Latin America and East Europe. Importantly, the same differences between Confucian Asian countries and Latin America emerge on the Nastiness factor. Thus, there is substantial agreement between studies of MEM and studies of noncognitive constructs that do not involve MEM measures. Stankov (in press) argues that harsh and unforgiving Confucian culture may be able to explain both the high ranking of Confucian countries on achievement tests used in international comparisons (e.g., PISA and TIMSS projects) and also high test anxiety and self-doubt that is also observed in these countries.

At the time of this writing, we have no empirical data to show that those convicted for terrorist activities score higher than the average member of the population on any of the three ingredient processes. We assume that this will be the case since the statements included in our surveys reflect the opinions and are sometimes taken verbatim from writings produced by terrorist groups. Even when such important validity data become available, on their own our measures of Nastiness, Grudge and Excuse will not be suitable for screening potential terrorists for the purpose of psychological profiling. Given that our data indicate only small or moderate correlations between the three MEM ingredients, a single MEM score may not be useful for decision making. Future research may suggest that high standing on all three ingredient processes (a profile score) together with additional clinical data may be indicative of problem behaviour or perhaps of psychopathology in need of intervention.

## The Potential Militant Extremist inside each of us?

The approach we have employed for the development of our MEM scales—the selection of statements reflecting MEM and their validation among members of the general population—may lead one to the conclusion that ingredients of MEM exist within all of us. While this is true in theory, the real situation is similar to what happens in medical diagnosis of some diseases that rely on assessments of particular conditions like cholesterol levels. Although we all have cholesterol in our blood stream, only those of us with high levels of “bad cholesterol” are candidates for intervention. This analogy may be extended further to include additional “risk factors”. Thus, the differing mean levels between groups defined by gender or country of origin, and potentially many others, may provide for a better definition of extremism relative to the society or group to which the person belongs. For example, since Malays as a group score high on the Grudge factor, an extreme score on this factor in Malaysia must be much higher than the extreme score on this factor in, say, China where perhaps the average Malay score may be seen as extreme. Similarly, different cut-off scores for extremism may exist for males and females. If such cut-off scores were to be deemed useful, careful further psychometric studies will have to be carried out in future.

Given the three ingredients of MEM, it is reasonable to raise the question whether they are equally important for evaluation or whether differential weights should be assigned to each. Of the three, Excuse is perhaps the least important. This is because it seems to imply an after-the-event activity. Furthermore, in its most common version—God or Divine Power—this is mostly a measure of religiosity and since there are so many religious people, some of whom may be fanatic with respect to their religious belief, high standing on the Excuse factor on its own may not be indicative of MEM and may lead to too many false positive classifications. This is not to say that Excuse is useless; rather, it should be used in conjunction with the other two MEM ingredients[[3]](#footnote-3).

From among the other two constructs, high standing on the Nastiness factor is the most important if we are interested in identifying those who are likely to spring into action. As mentioned earlier, high standing on this factor is conceptually linked to criminal behaviour. Thus, these are the people who are less opposed to the use of violence, see it as acceptable under certain circumstances and, presumably, would see fewer obstacles to the use of force. Nastiness is best thought off as an example of social attitudes, akin to dogmatism, authoritarianism or conservatism and, like these latter constructs, it is related to personality traits and therefore relatively immutable.

The third ingredient, Grudge, represents a trigger for action. If a person is high on Nastiness factor perhaps it can be expected that his/her threshold for action will be lowered whatever the Grudge. Stankov et al. (under review) argue also that Grudge is perhaps the most amenable to intervention. Personal Grudge that may be linked to forms of criminal behaviour may be possible to change by clinical interventions. Grudge in the sense used in our work that is more social in nature and is a precursor of terrorist actions in the world today, can perhaps be affected by media and education campaigns that address misconceptions about particular groups or events in social and political life. Terrorists, even suicide bombers, are best seen as rational actors—that is, what they do is explicable in terms of their beliefs and desires—who respond to the set of incentives that they find before them. Perhaps they can be fought by means of using a cool recalibration of their incentives.

It may be argued that, among the three factors identified in our work to date only one, Nastiness, represents a true psychological trait. Grudge and Excuse are defined with respect to outside sources and have a pronounced sociological and political component. This means that psychology on its own cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of militant extremist mindset. Here, as is often the case in life, psychology rubs shoulders with other sciences in order to achieve a better understanding of human behaviour.

## Measures of Muslim or any Type of Militant Extremist Mindset?

From the beginning, our approach to assessing MEM was deliberately developed in order to capture the generalist view of the construct (see Saucier et al., 2009). Needless to say, we were not entirely successful in our endeavor and one of our measures of MEM (Stankov et al., 2010b) still has a flavor that links it to the Muslim world. We refer to this version as “contemporary” to distinguish it from a more general and perhaps timeless version reported in Stankov et al. (2010a; under review).

Items in the contemporary version of MEM were developed using linguistic analysis in the following way. Over the internet we collected texts written by, or about, terrorist groups (target) and also control texts written by members of legitimate political parties in countries where terrorist groups originate. We then carried out linguistic/statistical analyses to determine what words best distinguish target texts from the control texts. The first column in Table 1 contains the first fifteen most critical words. As can be expected, contemporary target texts contain a number of Muslim words (Allah, Muhammad, Islamic, Islam, Muslims, Jihad). Several words (e.g., I, we, you, our) are also not linked to terrorism. In addition to the fifteen listed words, close to 500 additional words did show significant differences between the corpora. We used an extended list of words to select the fifteen critical MEM related words also listed in Table 1. These latter words were then used to select the target statements for the final version of the scale.

As can be seen in the second column of Table 1, the sentences chosen contained words that were less Islamic in nature (“Martyr” perhaps being an exception). Nevertheless, despite our efforts some statements that survived psychometric analyses and are now included in measures of MEM still have an Islamic flavor. The most notable are two statements that employed “West” as the key word (“*It has become clear that the West has an unspeakable hatred for Islam*” and “*Western leaders have forced their people to believe that Islam is the cancer of the world, thus it must be eliminated*”) and retained “Islam” in the stem. The remaining 22 statements that are a part of the MEM measure in Stankov et al. (2010b) do not make references to Muslims or Islamic themes.

The issue that still needs to be addressed is broadness of the measures of MEM. This is related to the frequently discussed distinction between domain specificity and domain generality. Is it better to have statements that are indicative of general MEM or is it better to include statements that reflect the views of a targeted terrorist group? Closely related, of course, is the question of practical vs theoretical utility of the MEM measures. As mentioned above, we have opted for generality/theoretical utility which, in the long run may work better. Practical needs of granting agencies, however, may on occasion dictate the development of more specific measures in future. Of course, a combination of both specific and general approaches may be the optimal solution.

Table 1. Most frequent words that distinguish contemporary terrorist writings from language used by legitimate political parties & words used to select statements   
(Stankov, Higgins, Saucier & Knežević, 2005b)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Most Frequent Words in Terrorist Writings | Selected Words |
| 1. Terrorist | Bomb |
| 2. Terrorism | Homeland |
| 3. Allah | Peace |
| 4. We | Brother |
| 5. Muhammad | Kill |
| 6. You | Terror |
| 7. Suicide | Enemy |
| 8. I | Leader |
| 9. Islamic | Terrorism |
| 10. Islam | Force |
| 11. Our | Martyr |
| 12. Will | War |
| 13. Muslims | God (Allah) |
| 14. Jihad | Path |
| 15. Kill | West |

## Work still to be Done

Our approach to the development of MEM measures is frankly empirical. We collected our statements with no theoretical preconceptions about the possible nature of militant extremism. This may be seen both as an advantage and otherwise. The outcome of our work appears meaningful and perhaps a coherent psychological theory that elaborates on our findings may be developed. Of particular importance may be the need to arrive at a better understanding of the Grudge ingredient of MEM. What aspects of our social life make people angry? And why? In other words, a motivational theory about MEM is needed. Another theoretical aspect is the relationship of the ingredient processes of MEM and a variety of noncognitive constructs that are of interest to social psychologists. Some of these have been related to MEM but many remain unexplored. For example, we know little about the relationship of MEM to measures of individualism and collectivism, social axioms, moral foundations, tightness-looseness and many others.

Another area that needs to be covered is the relationship of MEM to demographic variables and especially to criminal behaviour. If, as we believe, Nastiness captured by the MEM scales is similar to that of incarcerated individuals, this will need to be shown empirically. Relatedly, we need to know what categories of convicted criminals agree or do not agree with measures of Grudge and Excuse. Furthermore, while Nastiness has been essentially the same across our studies, Grudge and Excuse have sub-components. It may be useful in future to develop measures of these latter two MEM ingredients that have not been covered in our previous work. For example, the mindset of eco-terrorists may be poorly captured by our current measures.

Finally, while we know that there are cross-cultural differences on measures of MEM we still do not know whether these measures will be sensitive enough to detect changes in the overall levels of radicalization in the population. Given that this is one of the main intended uses of our instruments, we need additional data to establish the sensitivity to changed social circumstances. This aspect of the work may be especially hard to accomplish since the effects can be examined only if an extraordinary event that shakes the society to its core were to take place in a particular country.

## Conclusion

This chapter summarises the work carried out by our team over the past few years. The main aim of this research effort was to develop an instrument that can be used for the assessment of militant extremist mindset in the population. Three different rationales and procedures were employed for the selection of items, and two empirical studies based on samples from several countries were conducted in order to examine psychometric properties of the scales.

In the outcome, three different ingredient processes of MEM were identified: Nastiness (condoning and advocating violence), Grudge (dissatisfaction with the existing conditions of the group one belongs to) and Excuse (justification of violence in the name of some higher moral power). Nastiness is a psychological trait that is best understood as belonging to the category of social attitudes, similar to dogmatism and authoritarianism. Like most social attitudes, Nastiness is likely to be resilient to attempts to modify it and it is not only characteristic of terrorists but is likely to be present to a significant degree in the minds of persons convicted of criminal activity. The ingredient of MEM we refer to as Grudge has at least two but potentially more than two facets. One of these is the tendency to apportion the blame for contemporary ills in the world to the West or, relatedly, that the West is sinful. The other aspect of the Grudge factor is the perception that the world is rotten and devoid of moral principles—i.e., Vile World. Grudge is not a pure psychological trait like Nastiness. Its impact derives from the interaction with the external world and it contains sociological and political overtones. The third ingredient of MEM, the Excuse, is perhaps the least interesting because its main incarnation – religiosity – is not a new construct. The other two sub-components of Excuse—Divine Power and Utopianism—are approaching separation from God but, in the final analyses, do not change its interpretation.

Our measures of MEM are generally not group-specific even though a contemporary version of the survey (Stankov et al., 2010b) that is based on linguistic analyses of the published material from different terrorist groups contains statements that relate to Muslim culture. We believe that potential users of the scale will require both generalist and group-specific versions of the scales. Future work on MEM should focus on providing validity evidence for the measures and, in particular, on their concurrent validity by correlating MEM with measures of terrorist (and criminal) behaviour.

Primary uses of our militant extremist mindset measures are anticipated to be in studying general populations not aberrant groups. The main focus may be either on cross-cultural comparisons or on the detection of changes in attitudes and belief systems following dramatic events that affect the society.

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2. See Nicholas Lemann's piece in the *New Yorker*: http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2010/  
   04/26/100426crbo\_books\_lemann?currentPage=1#ixzz0o2tHXaTm [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is possible to take the opposing view to our interpretation of the role of Grudge factor. For example, as pointed out by Dr. S. Morony, this may be seen as the “justification” factor that overcomes any niggling doubt that what you are doing might be “wrong”. It also makes the group highly cohesive, and presumably silences any voices of dissent. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)