



## **THE LANGUAGE OF TERRORISTS: ASSESSING RISK OF VIOLENCE IN ONLINE SPACES**

**Date:** November 19, 2024

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On November 19th, 2024, Dr. Julia Ebner presented *The Language of Terrorists: Assessing Risk of Violence in Online Spaces* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the connection between identity fusion and violent behavior, the associated use of kinship language by ingroups, and the impact of shared dysphoric experiences like combat military trauma on identity fusion.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

Dr. Julia Ebner presented a violence model that she and her colleagues at The University of Oxford developed, illustrating that identity fusion – a powerful form of group alignment where personal and group identity become equivalent – is statistically linked to violence across varied geographic locations. Their model was based on a statistical analysis of terrorist manifestos and control group manifestos of non-violent authors, incorporating decades of empirical evidence from a range of disciplines. Shared dysphoric experience and perceived sense of shared biology are drivers of identity fusion, which is expressed via kinship language applied to other group members. Dr. Ebner's model is particularly helpful in detangling what an actual threat is versus an empty threat.

### **BACKGROUND**

#### **Presentation**

Understanding psycholinguistic markers of violent extremism is important for practitioners in order for analysts to differentiate between empty threats and those that are more likely to translate into offline violence. Dr. Ebner began her presentation with an overview of a project she and her colleagues at the University of Oxford completed, which aimed to understand psychological patterns of proneness to violence that can be traced in language. She explained that their analysis was an attempt to produce a new method of assessing risk that new users will engage in violent extremism, to better understand the links between activities online and offline, and to distinguish between credible and empty threats. The study drew on multiple disciplines such as cognitive evolutionary anthropology, as well as social psychology and communication studies.

To explain the theoretical background of the study, different forms of group cohesion were explored. Dr Ebner highlighted that identification with a group can happen at a superficial level and lead to ideological fixation, but behavioral or violent outcome is linked to identity fusion, a distinct form of extreme group cohesion. Identity fusion is distinct from simply just identifying with a group; as it involves feelings of kinship and oneness with the group. When high levels of identity fusion with a group are reached, behavioral outcomes of progroup violence are more likely, especially when the ingroup is perceived as threatened by a demonized outgroup. Previous studies in multiple geographical and cultural contexts (including Libyan battalions, British and Brazilian football hooligans, Indonesian Islamist fundamentalists, etc.) demonstrated these links between fusion and violence.

Dr. Ebner highlighted that fused individuals perceive the group as family or kin-like. Citing soldiers with war zone or combat experiences as an example, she further explained that one pathway to identify fusion starts with shared dysphoric experience with the ingroup. For example, violent conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine or Gaza conflicts can lead to high levels of fusion due to shared trauma on both sides of the war. Another pathway to identity fusion is a perceived shared essence or biology with the ingroup, for example based on phenotypic matching as can be seen in cases of extremist groups that highlight shared racial or genetic traits.

The new study confirmed the hypothesis that a “deadly cocktail” of psychological ingredients is associated with outcomes of extreme progroup violence. These ingredients include identity fusion, perceived outgroup threat, outgroup othering, as well as outgroup violence inducing norms. Dr Ebner and

her colleagues carried out the first comparative computational linguistic terrorist manifesto analysis, finding statistically significant markers of identity fusion (specifically, kinship language and metaphors of shared blood with the ingroup) when compared to the manifestos non-violent authors. Outgroup othering (specifically, demonization and dehumanization), a perceived existential threat to the ingroup, as well as violence endorsement were also statistically significant in her and her colleagues' study. The advantage of this framework is that it can provide the security and intelligence community with evidence-based psycholinguistic risk factors beyond explicit violent threats, thereby complementing existing methods of assessing threats. This is particularly relevant in light of the increasing amounts of threats and calls to violence online, as well as trends to use satirical and gamified language that blurs the lines between trolling and terror threats.

An additional paper on the QAnon movement by Dr. Ebner was explained in detail as she applied the violence risk model to QAnon – a group whose threat level and violent potential is commonly debated. The model was applied to different QAnon groups in different geographies and languages. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, the results found high prevalence of identity fusion markers and other risk factors, when compared to control groups. The estimated violence risk was particularly high in English-speaking channels, which Dr. Ebner highlighted needs further analysis.

Dr. Ebner closed her presentation by stating there is a trend in the rise of ideologically fluid movements (“salad bar extremism”) and that the presented research opens new doors for possible prevention and intervention approaches focused on identity and group processes as opposed to ideology. She emphasized the need for thinking about how to defuse individuals from their extremist communities, as this area has been particularly neglected, suggesting that highlighting unshared experiences with the ingroup or shared experiences with the outgroup may help in the process.

### **KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION**

- Identity fusion is distinct from identification; it involves a perceived oneness of self and group. Language of kinship, shared dysphoric experience, and perceived sense of shared biology are all factors related to identity fusion.
- Dehumanization of an outgroup was statistically significant in the model results, suggesting that the outgroup can escalate the mental dehumanization to physical violence against the perceived outgroup.

- Across QAnon forums, the violence risk model found high levels of identity fusion markers, when compared to control groups, and English language groups had more direct calls for violent action, which requires further analysis.
- Specific language relating to kinship can, when combined with other linguistic markers, point to higher risk of extremist violence.

### FURTHER READING

Ebner, J. (2020). *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists* (London: Bloomsbury)

Swann, W. B., M. Buhrmester, et al. (2014). “What Makes a Group Worth Dying For? Identity Fusion Fosters Perception of Familial Ties, Promoting Self-Sacrifice”. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106 (6), 912–26.

Whitehouse, H. (2018). “Dying for the group: Towards a general theory of extreme self-sacrifice”. *Behavioral and Brain Science* 41: e192. doi:10.1017/S0140525X18000249.



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