

The Search for Meaning: exploring the radical worldview of Islamist extremists in Victoria

Rosleenda Mohamed Ali

*Researcher, Global Terrorism Research Centre and School of Psychology and Psychiatry,
Monash University*

Simon Moss

*School of Psychology and Psychiatry
Research Fellow, Global Terrorism Research Centre
Monash University*

Abstract

The present research explored how Islamist extremists in Victoria derive meaning from their pursuit of violent *jihad*. The study drew upon Baumeister's (1991) four needs of meaning in life—future purpose, sense of control, moral values and personal worth—as its conceptual framework to examine how extremists construct arguments that induce the acceptance of violence against civilians. Using a qualitative approach, the study relies on textual analysis of open-source data, with a primary focus on assessing the statements that reflect the mindsets of extremists. Findings showed that Baumeister's (1991) meaning-framework was useful in illustrating how extremists justify violence in the name of religion. However, cognitive dissonance can interfere with the meaning-making process, and potentially undermine commitment to the cause.

Introduction

The concern about homegrown radicalization has escalated globally, as a result of the March 2004 Madrid bombing and the July 2005 London bombings. Australia is not immune to this homegrown threat. In November 2005, the arrest of 22 Australian men for fostering and preparing domestic terrorist attacks brought chilling reality that the threat had undeniably reached Australian soil. The court trials later revealed that the men believed they had a religious obligation to perform violent *jihad* in Australia, even if this duty involved indiscriminate violence against scores of civilians (Benbrika & Ors., 2009, VSC 21, para 14). Why did they espouse such an aggressive outlook? How do they rationalize such unmitigated acts of violence?

The present study explores these questions and generates new insights into psychological determinants that might prompt people's receptiveness to radical ideology, with a specific

focus on the worldview of convicted Islamist extremists in Victoria. In particular, this study explores how these extremists derive a *sense of meaning* in their violent pursuit. In this paper, violent radicalisation is defined as “a process in which radical ideas are accompanied by the development of a willingness to directly support or engage in violent acts” (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010, p.798).

The search for meaning

Research on Islamic violent radicalization has surged in recent years (Kepel, 2004; Gibbs, 2005; Sageman, 2008; Khosrokhavar, 2005; Bakker, 2006; Moghaddam, 2006; Silber & Bhatt, 2007; Ryan, 2007; Silke, 2008; Veldhuis & Staun, 2009; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Porter & Kebell, 2010), each of which has provided perspectives on the multi-faceted causes of radicalization. Although these studies differ on some arguments, they generally agree that extremists’ justification for violence rests mainly on *perceptions* that are based on subjective interpretations of events connected to the Muslim world. For example, perceived injustices against Muslims in conflict zones or feeling threatened because Islam is under attack by Western aggression are often broached to justify violence. This paper proposes that the *search for meaning* underpins many of these perceptions, and that it is the *meaning* ascribed to such perceptions that contribute to the formation of radical worldview (Veldhuis & Staun, 2009).

Why do people search for meaning? Research has shown that meaning is a fundamental aspect of the human condition and that people are constantly in pursuit of meaning (Heine, Proulx, Vohs, 2006). Meaning is conceptualized in relational terms; that is, people strive to “establish mental representations of expected relations that tie together elements of their external world, elements of the self, and most importantly, bind the self to the external world” (Heine, et.al., 2006, p.89). This endeavour helps them make sense of the world around them, comprehend their place in it, and predict their environment (Debats, 1999).

Meaning also sets the context by which individuals ensure that they are leading a purposeful life. This context must be filled with goals, beliefs and values as defined by the individual for life to be considered meaningful (Mascaro & Rosen, 2006). As Frankl (1984, p.121) said, “Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a "secondary rationalization" of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning”. How do people construct a meaningful worldview?

Baumeister (1991) delineates four fundamental needs or conditions that must be fulfilled to experience a sense of meaning in life. First, people need to feel that their current activities are linked to some future purpose. Second, people need to believe their pursuits in life are based on moral values. They need affirmation their moral actions would benefit the community or society. Third, people desire feelings of efficacy or control over the events in their life. Specifically, they need to perceive the environment as predictable to ensure the success of their endeavours. They also want to be recognized for their ability to make a difference in life. Fourth, people need to feel worthy and respected; they need to feel they have developed the qualities needed to pursue their endeavours.

In line with Baumeister's (1991) arguments on the four needs of meaning, this paper posits that extremists, like all ordinary individuals, need to experience meaning to ensure their lives are purposeful and meaningful. Given that Islamist extremists tend to defend their goals by providing religious justifications as their blueprint for indiscriminate violence, understanding the relationship between *religion and meaning in life* bears relevance to the consideration of radicalization.

Religion and Meaning in Life

Various studies (Exline, 2002; Baumeister, 1991; Pargament, 2009; Francis & Hills, 2007; Steger, Pickering, Adams, Burnett, Shin, Dik & Stauner, 2010) have shown that, for religious people, faith serves as a meaning system that provides clarity to questions about meaning and purpose in life. The relationship between 'Islam and meaning in life' from the psychological perspective has received scarce attention. However, a recent study by Tiliouine and Belgoumidi's (2009) has shed some interesting insights. The authors developed a scale called 'The Comprehensive Measure of Islamic Religiosity (CMIR)' of which the items were derived from the *Koran* and the *Hadith* (The sayings of Prophet Muhammad). The CMIR discriminated four domains: *Religious Belief* (e.g., believing in God, Judgment Day), *Religious Practice* (e.g., prayers, fasting), *Religious Altruism* (e.g., helping people in their difficulties for God's sake, preferring to deal with people whose religious commitment are high) and *Religious Enrichment* (e.g., reading religious books, follow religious TV/radio programmes). When tested on a Muslim sample, the authors found that only *Religious Belief* and *Religious Altruism* contributed significantly to experiencing a sense of meaning in life.

In a sense, these findings might shed light on the tendency of Islamist extremists to justify their violent pursuits as acting in defence of God's religion (i.e., religious beliefs) to alleviate

the perceived sufferings of Muslims under Western aggression (i.e. religious altruism). However, beliefs and altruism cannot alone explain why mainstream Muslims who uphold religious principles and live virtuously neither subscribe to radical ideology nor support extremism or terrorism. Arguably, because these two concepts are primarily in the mindset of Muslims as expressions of piety (Ryan, 2007), terrorist ideologues tend to manipulate and interweave these concepts within radical narratives as persuasive messaging to influence vulnerable minds. In support of this assertion, studies (Veldhuis & Staun, 2009; Hoffman 2009) have shown that radicalised Muslims often cited altruism (i.e. to help the *ummah* or global Islamic community) as justifications for violent acts against the West. In a similar vein, Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman and Orehek (2009, p. 333) observed that the “quest for personal significance” and a desire to fulfil “a sense of social duty and obligation” were key psychological motivations underlying suicide bombers’ commitment to their mission.

The present study

Against this background, the present study posits that, when Islamist extremists (in Victoria) justify their pursuit of violent *jihad*, they are essentially cultivating the conditions to pursue meaning in their cause. That is, they need to construct a worldview that can foster a *sense of meaning* in their violent endeavour. To test this prediction, the present research relies on primary open-source data. To analyse how they derive a sense of meaning, the study will draw upon Baumeister’s (1991) four needs of meaning (i.e. future purpose, sense of control, moral values, personal worth) as its conceptual framework.

Despite the vast array of research on Islamist violent radicalization (Dalgaard-Neilsen, 2010; Silber & Bhatt, 2007), these studies have focused mainly on case studies in Europe or America. Their findings, although informative, might not be socially or culturally relevant to Australia. Indeed, the literature revealed only one published psychological research paper that has pursued this inquiry (Porter & Keibell, 2010). These authors had based their analysis on the process models of radicalisation, with a primary focus on Australian terrorists (including individuals charged under Operation Pendennis). As such, the present study attempts to complement the existing knowledge by offering an alternative perspective and contribute new insights on the psychology of radicalisation within the Australian context. Specifically, this study identifies the tenets and principles that individuals adopt to fulfil the conditions that foster meaning but vindicate a radical perspective.

Method

Sample

As the focus of the present study is based on *convicted* Islamist extremists in Victoria and who have had their appeals finalized by the Supreme Court of Victoria at the time of writing, the final sample comprised of eight members

Data Collection

Only information that is available in the public domain was used for this study. The primary sources included court transcripts, which describe case summaries (e.g., background information, circumstances of involvement, court judgments and sentences, statements made by the extremists), all of which were retrieved from two websites: The Supreme Court of Victoria (www.supremecourt.vic.gov.au) and the Australian Legal Information Institute website (<http://www.austlii.edu.au/>). The court transcripts reflect factual evidence as accepted by the court, and thus represent a reliable source of information (Sageman, 2008). The transcripts were supplemented by newspaper articles compiled from various Australian publications (Porter & Kebell, 2010). Data extracted from newspaper articles were cross-referenced where possible with the court transcripts to strengthen its reliability. A total of 65 court transcripts and 27 newspaper articles were examined.

Statements reflecting conversation excerpts—amongst the members in the current sample—were extracted from the court transcripts and newspaper articles, which had reproduced and published them in verbatim-quotation format. Previous research that has substantiated their findings primarily on verbatim quotations and conversation-excerpts (Haggarty, 1995; Corden & Sainsbury, 2006; Stankov, Higgins, Saucier & Knezevic, 2010) has shown the reliability of such data in reflecting the actual voices of subjects. Accordingly, quotations from these subjects—as presented in the Results section—have been assigned code-names (e.g., MJM156).

Analytic approach

Textual data was analysed according to the 6-phase guiding principles of qualitative thematic analysis in psychology, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The phases are familiarization of data, generation of codes (themes), identifying data relevant to each potential theme, review themes to ensure their relevance to the research question(s), refine

specific features of each theme, and selection of illustrative extracts to anchor the research findings. To further establish rigour, the final data were also subjected to the 15-point checklist criteria for a good thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.96). In addition, an independent rater with background in qualitative research assessed the coded themes for reliability and consistency. This process of inter-rater reliability was necessary to ensure that the findings were a product of several lenses (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Results

Future purpose

To clarify their future purpose, the sample members needed to ensure their pursuits will be rewarding and fulfilling in the future. That is, they needed to reconcile contradictory standards and beliefs. In the present study, the individuals utilized three interrelated strategies to fulfil this need: (i) they defined their entire purpose around the need to consolidate a single abstract entity, the *ummah*, (ii) they amplified the distinction between members of this entity and non-members, and (iii) they then rejected the goals and standards of all non-members (outgroup). Taken together, these strategies ensure they can cultivate a purpose that is not contradicted by any legitimate sources of information.

To illustrate, the members generally believed that participation in violent *jihad* will yield a better future for the *ummah*. Their expectations can be broadly summarized as follows: a) prevent future victimisation of Muslims in conflict zones (Johnson, 2008), b) intimidate the Australian government to cease sending troops to Afghanistan or Iraq (R V Benbrika & Ors VSC 21., 2009, para 15), and c) revival of *Shariah* law (R v Benbrika & Ors VSC 21., 2009, para 21).

The members also manifested a dichotomy between their own collective and other groups, as observed in their references to “unbelievers” or “*kuffar*” (non-believers). One member insisted that violent jihad served as a religious mandate that advocates the killing of all non-believers. This worldview was deeply entrenched in his belief system such that when challenged by another cleric who presented a moderate version of the concept *jihad*, this member strongly defended his worldview:

They say *jihad* means many things...He's a donkey...He doesn't understand his religion. Tell him, Ok, Allah he mentioned the jihad in the Koran. What does it mean? It's fighting the unbelievers, that's all. And the *kuffar*

(unbelievers), this word, they know what this word means. It means we want to kill them. (Moor, 2008)

The findings also indicate that, when a person has yet to construct his worldview and is contemplating his future, the perceived uncertainty about life might render him vulnerable to absorbing a (radical) worldview that provides clarity and promises a meaningful future. Because the worldview has yet to be constructed, an individual can sometimes passively ‘learn’ or ‘adopt’ a worldview that has been shaped by others (Almond, Appleby & Sivan, 2003). For example, one member (MJM156) wished to escape the domestic grind of marriage, children and its accompanying responsibilities:

MJM156: "This is what I am searching for ... to look for a person to tell me, to guide me, to tell me 'Go there, do that' that's it."

MJM532: "The first thing that is asked of you is the pledge, and this is the pledge is the jihad. That you pledge to me in the obedience of Allah and his messenger....."

MJM156: "Now another phase has begun. Having children and the like, I don't want. I know because if I go down this path, that's it, it means that I will forget the entire world."

MJM532: "As long as you accept to join the *jamaah* (group) it means that you will benefit."

(Moor, 2008)

MJM 156 appears to want more out of life and was convinced that a bleak future awaited him if he married. As such, pledging for *jihad* could have provided him with a sense of meaning about how he envisions his future. On the other hand, his remarks could also be suggestive that the idea of marriage is a distraction to one's commitment to jihad rather than a reflection of fear of a bleak future.

Some members believed that participation in violent jihad and martyrdom would assure them heavenly rewards in the (future) afterlife, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

...anyone who fight for this sake of Allah . . . when he dies, the first drop of blood that comes from him . . . all his sin will be forgiven. (Grattan, 2005)

From this example, it can be argued that the motivation for martyrdom is anchored on the notion that all sins will be forgiven in the near future. Hence, the individual contemplating martyrdom can feel reassured that his intended actions will indeed provide a sense of future purpose—in line with one of Baumeister's (1991) need for meaning—where he anticipates a rewarding afterlife. To achieve this aim, some individuals might be especially motivated to seek a sense of control or predictability about life.

Sense of control

This theme is concerned with the feeling of experiencing control; expectations that the world is consistent, and is therefore predictable. To instil a sense of control, the sample members seemed to impute all problems to a single entity: non-believers. As research on enmity has shown, when individuals ascribe threats to one source, they experience a sense of control (Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010). They feel they need only monitor one source of threat instead of a multitude of hazards. That is, the members generally believed that Muslims are oppressed because of Western aggression, including Australia, as expressed by one member:

The US, Australia, any country that is attacking any other country to take over for land (Moor, 2008).

In a sense, such perceptions fuelled a sense of impending threat and uncertainty about the future of Muslims. For example, one member justified his involvement on the basis that he felt “frustrated and powerless in a hostile environment” (R v The Queen, 2010, VSCA 281, para 29). Another member expressed his concerns that infidels seemed to be dominating the world and usurping power:

...Just lately my eyes have been opening. [They] have got control of us and the world, the whole world, I just realised this recently (Cooke, 2005).

Dissatisfaction with Australia's policies that endorsed the sending of troops to Iraq and Afghanistan were also rife among members who perceived these policies as such: that Australia, together with other supposed enemies of Islam, had invaded Muslim countries and

killed Muslims residing in those conflict zones. On this basis, members were convinced that *jihad* was justified in Australia. To regain control of the ‘environment’ as it relates to the future of global Muslims, some members felt a sense of urgency to initiate actions that could support the Muslim community. For instance, one member pressured the leader that if the latter did not “prepare something”, the group would “run away” (R v Benbrika & Ors., 2009, para 95).

Moral Values

The third theme reflects the need for people to believe their actions have positive value and are based on moral ideals. To justify their practices and demonstrate their morality, the sample members invoked three principles. They maintained their behaviour represents retribution. They argued that retribution sustains the natural order and is thus moral. And, they assumed that anything that is consistent with divine wishes is moral.

For example, members believed their violent actions could alleviate the perceived sufferings of Muslim “brothers and sisters”, as illustrated in the following example:

MJM532: For example, if you kill, we kill here a thousand, the government is going to think.

MJM215: Bring the troops back?

MJM532: (inaudible)

MJM215: And then (Allah willing in Arabic) that's been, that's helping brothers and sisters...

(Johnson, 2008)

In another example, the lead member defended his reasons for not discouraging his followers to undergo overseas terrorist training on moral grounds: "If I do this, it means I am betraying my religion." (Grattan, 2005)

There was also evidence that some members were initially uncertain about the pursuit of violent *jihad*. One member was seemingly concerned about the ‘morality’ of killing civilians, and sought clarification on its permissibility within the Islamic context. In this respect, the leader was instrumental in providing religious justifications:

- MJM532: Whoever transgresses you, transgress him as he transgresses you.
- MJM215: If, for example, John Howard, kills innocent family, Muslim?
- MJM532: Yeah?
- MJM215: Do we, we will make transgress back to him? Do we have to kill him and his family or can we just (inaudible) his people like, like (inaudible) people at the football?
- MJM532: If they kill our kids we kill (inaudible) little kids.
- MJM215: The innocent ones?
- MJM532: The innocent ones. Because he kills our innocent ones.
- MJM215: And we send a message back to them?
- MJM532: That's it.
- MJM215: Eye, eye for an eye.
- MJM532: So the jihad exists here.

(Moor, 2008)

In another example, the leader reportedly offered religious guidance on the permissibility in Islam to kill the women and children of the *kuffar*:

We won't stop jihad but we don't intentionally target those people. But even if we intentionally target them . . . we have a religious legitimacy in doing that . . . How many Muslims have been killed? How many children have been killed? (Kissane, 2008)

The concept of 'moral values' was also linked to criminal activities that were construed as 'permissible activities' from a religious perspective, because the funds generated was used to advance the group's cause. For example, one member was involved in credit card fraud, (Ross, 2008) and three others were involved in illicit car-rebirthing (R v Benbrika & Ors., 2008, VSC 477, para 14). These members were aware that such activities were incongruent

with religious principles, but their concerns were easily suppressed by other members who convinced them otherwise (Ross, 2008).

Personal worth

The fourth theme is concerned with feelings of personal worth or self esteem. To boost their sense of self esteem, the sample members emphasized their piety and underscored the association between piety and power of influence. They also committed only to massive endeavours, such as killing thousands of people. The present findings showed that members needed to believe that they can contribute by committing to a moral purpose (“doing it in Allah’s cause” (Moor, 2008). In this endeavour, they needed to believe in themselves, that they have ‘special qualities’ to fulfil that purpose and earn God’s favour. For instance, one member reportedly aspired to be a suicide member (Moor, 2008). Another member was advised that emulating the examples of past heroes such as the “soldiers of Allah” would aid the re-establishment of a Muslim nation (Ross, 2008).

To boost the self esteem of one member, the leader told him that if he wanted to play a significant role in *jihad*, and make a difference for the Muslim community, he should not “kill one or two or three” (Kissane, 2008), but “...kill a thousand...” (Johnson, 2008), and getting “large numbers here, the government will listen” (Kissane, 2008).

The need to reaffirm personal worth in the eyes of God can be a motivating factor to sustain commitment to the cause, even if people feel inadequate about their personal qualities. For example, in a discussion about sending a message to the Australian government in retaliation for the loss of Muslim lives in conflict zones, one member seemingly waived in his commitment to the cause. He entertained doubts on whether participation in violence against innocents was actually permissible in the eyes of God:

MJM215: Sometimes I have got doubts. If I do this, is it pleasing to Him?

MJM532: [It’s] what God wants.

(Cooke, 2005)

Feeling worthy was not necessarily confined to just ‘earning’ God’s favour. For one member, he aspired to be remembered favourably by others in the community for his participation in the cause. It is plausible that he needed a reaffirmation of his personal worth where he would :

“...like to be remembered in this life by my brothers to have changed something in this world.” (Kissane, 2008)

Cognitive dissonance

Cognitive dissonance can be defined as feelings of discomfort that derived from two cognitions that contradict each other (Festinger, 1957). This theme featured substantially in some discussions on issues of moral rationalization. Cognitive dissonance merits attention because such discomfort could disrupt the meaning-making process. Evidence indicates that some members battled with their conscience on whether criminal activities were permissible in Islam if the intent is for *jihad*.

For example, one member expressed initial reservations about committing credit card fraud because he knew this act violated religious principles. However, his moral conscience was suppressed when encouraged by his peers to invest in such ‘sacrifices’ because “the pleasures of Allah is expensive.” (Kissane,2008). A fellow member assured him that it was “permissible to take money from the “kuffar”, or disbelievers, because they had shed the blood of Muslim innocents in countries like Afghanistan” (Ross, 2008).

In another example, one member (MJM536) similarly expressed his reservations about a stolen car be stored in his garage because he could not reconcile his own moral considerations with that of his peers’ rationalization that stealing is justified on religious grounds (ie. “doing it in Allah’s cause”):

MJM536: I can't see how it's right. Stealing cars? I don't want coppers coming here.

MJM145: You doing it in Allah's cause.

MJM536: In Allah's cause? Man, not stealing cars, come on man.

MJM611: It's what we have to do man.

MJM145: What more proof do you want? You think we can just go and get the weapons and walk off? We need money to get it, praise is to Allah.

MJM611: He's worried about having it here, in a tin shed.

MJM145: You'll, you'll point a gun at a *kuffar's* head and shoot him
but you won't put a stolen car here?

MJM536: This is different. Don't put that with this.

(Moor, 2008)

To demonstrate that stealing for the purpose of advancing the jihad cause was a commonly accepted 'deal' among like-minded individuals, another member attempted to convince him with the following argument by drawing parallels to how other Muslim 'brothers' had supposedly battled their moral conscience concerning the issue of stealing in order to generate funds for the purpose of jihad:

How do you think the brothers in Chechnya. And how do you think they gather? They go steal just like this. You don't see, you only see those nice [inaudible] macho videos where they're all holding AKs and all were shooting. You don't see what they do behind (R V Benbrika & Ors. VSCA 281, 2010, para 382).

Preoccupation with numbers of human casualties

The findings also indicate that, to ensure that the pursuit violent jihad is *meaningful in its utmost sense*, retaliation must involve significant human casualties to send a deterrent message (to the government) and seize their attention. For example, the leader rationalized his justification for violence on the basis that:

...if we want to die for jihad we do maximum damage...damage their buildings...
damage their lives ... just to show them...(R v Atik VSC 299., 2007, para 11).

This particular extract also resonates with two needs of meaning within Baumeister's (1991) framework—moral values and personal worth. However, this quote is equally suggestive that the leader was preoccupied with gaining worldwide attention by 'anything' that could cause maximum damage to people as well as properties. Similarly, in a discussion about conducting a terrorist attack in Australia similar to that of the 2004 Madrid bombing, two members discussed their motivation to replicate the event by perpetrating "a big thing" (Kissane, 2008).

Discussion

The present research explored how Islamist extremists construct a radical worldview, which enabled them to derive a sense of meaning in their pursuit of violent jihad, including how they justified unmitigated acts of violence against innocents. The findings showed that Baumeister's (1991) framework of the four needs (themes) of meaning in life—purpose, sense of control, moral values and personal worth—represent a useful starting point to appreciate how the pursuit of *meaning* can induce the acceptance of a radical worldview. Two sub-themes (i.e., 'Cognitive dissonance' and 'Preoccupation with number of human casualties') emerged in the analyses which bear relevance to notions of meaning. The ensuing paragraphs will discuss these findings.

The findings revealed three different tenets that individuals may adopt that instil a sense of future purpose, but reinforce a worldview that is receptive to radical narratives. First, members found meaning in their cause, which they perceived would assure a better future for the *ummah*. That is, they subscribed to 'utopian thinking', believing that an ideal perfect world exists (Saucier, Akers, Shen-Miller, Knezevic, & Stankov, 2009). In pursuit of this utopian world, they were willing to accept violence as a necessary measure. In a sense, the notion of 'moral values' (seek a better future for one's group) and 'retribution' (for the Enemy) can facilitate that ready acceptance of violence, presenting as psychological 'triggers' in the formation of a radical worldview.

Second, when meaning (i.e. justifications for violence against non-believers) is embodied in the individual's cultural worldview, defending that worldview when challenged by other people represents a cardinal need for self-affirmation (Pyszczynski, Abdollahi, Solomon, Greenberg, Cohen & Weise, 2006). Thus, dehumanizing the 'other' (e.g., "donkey") is a defence mechanism whereby human qualities are effectively replaced with animal-like names; the 'other' is now perceived as a subhuman whose feelings or opinions can be easily dismissed (Bandura, 1999).

Third, when people are unclear about the meaning of the future, a radical worldview filled with a "prescriptive ideology" can offer clarity about how to lead a meaningful life (Delgaard-Nielsen, 2010). Collectively, these three examples (i.e., utopian thinking, dehumanization, prescriptive ideology) suggest that the pursuit of goals as it relates to a future purpose, can be made meaningful when 'incoherent worldviews—that encompasses both rational (at least from the extremists' viewpoint) and irrational biased reasoning—

prompt the acceptance of radical narratives. In other words, these examples demonstrate the point that conflicting perspectives on which behaviours are presumed to be rewarding, can compromise the capacity of individuals to generate a purpose they feel will be rewarding.

The second theme—the desire to experience feelings of control—is linked to expectations that life should be predictable. The overriding sentiment amongst the sample members were uncertainties about the Muslim world (e.g., perceptions of being persecuted, fear of subjugation by perceived enemies of Islam). Such ideas can evoke ‘group hysteria’ and fuel perceptions that they must seize control of the situation to ensure their survival (Beck, 2002; Saucier, e.t.al, 2009). These observations imply that a ‘sense of impending threat’ about the environment can be fertile grounds to breed radical ideas (Veldhius & Staun, 2009). To regain control, the perceived enemy must be taught a lesson (e.g., “...send a message...”). However, to engage in killing requires a radical alteration of the mindset. Thus, to ease the psychological barriers to violence, justifications—couched in religious terms—are effective in providing a sense of predictability and assurance, that their actions are based on sacred ideals (Beck, 2002).

The need to perceive their violent pursuit as based on moral values was strongly evident among the sample members. Presumably, the killing of civilians will intimidate the government to pull out its troops from conflict zones, and this would mean “helping brothers and sisters [in Islam]”. A sense of distrust towards the government was also evident for sending troops to Muslim countries to “take over for land”, which evoked a siege mentality and even competitive mindsets (e.g., “do maximum damage...just to show them...”). Further support for this competitiveness can be seen in the apparent ‘preoccupation with numbers of casualties’ whereby the rationale for homing in on “large numbers” of soft targets was to send a strong deterrent message. In other words, the magnitude of the intended retaliation must include significant numbers to make a *meaningful impact*, albeit at the expense of innocent lives.

In terms of personal worth, the members perceived that participation in violent *jihad* provided a sense of empowerment that they had ‘special qualities’ to undertake God’s work. Emulating the virtues of past *mujahideen* bolstered a sense of worthiness; that in the eyes of God, one is as good as past holy warriors. This observation is consistent with research which has shown that for Islamist militants, “imitating heroes who enjoyed divine sanction implies extension of that sanction to one’s own deeds in the present” (Ryan, 2007, p.987). In addition, the findings

also showed that a person whose self-worth is threatened (e.g., you'll point a gun at a *kuffar's* head and shoot him but you won't put a stolen car here?") may be inclined to suppress his conscience in the face of pride, and proceed with the discomfiting act.

The findings also highlighted the significant role of 'cognitive dissonance' in *interfering* and possibly disrupting the meaning-making process. That is, whilst individuals might outwardly subscribe to radical ideologies, they might not be as fully committed to the violent cause (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010). In the present study, while members in their conscience acknowledged the moral and ethical religious code on stealing (i.e., credit card fraud, car theft, storage of stolen vehicles), they could not convincingly articulate their reservations in the midst of peer pressure. This suggests that mutual encouragement from peers can sometimes outweigh one's own moral considerations and reinforce the acceptance of radical beliefs (Veldhuis & Staun, 2009). The adoption of criminal activities to support the *jihad* cause is not a new phenomenon. For example, Jacobsen (2010) observed that terrorist group 'Al-Fatah' (an Al-Qaeda linked group) justified bank-robbing activities from 'usurious/infidel' institutions on religious grounds because the stolen funds were re-directed for the *jihad* cause.

Cognitive dissonance was also effective in generating doubts about whether violence is indeed sanctioned by religion (e.g., "...got doubts. If I do this, is it pleasing to Him?"). Such perceptions can potentially undermine commitment to the cause due to forces impinging on the individual's conscience at a particular moment. It is argued that these hesitations or "critical decisional points" (Taylor & Horgan, 2006, p.598) are crucial, because they compel re-evaluation of actions which can undermine commitment to the cause (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009), or even prompt disengagement from the group (Jacobsen, 2010).

The nature of the conversation-exchanges between members is invaluable because these interactions capture the interplay of radical ideas and group processes. The findings indicate that members often sought clarification on religious matters with the leader, who in turn provided his own 'brand' of religious interpretation. In a sense, the leader can be regarded as exploiting a very real and human need, that is, a search for meaning. The myopic dependence on the leader's explanations can render individuals vulnerable to inculcating radical ideas, especially when they accept the distorted teachings without question (Taylor & Horgan, 2006).

Collectively, the discussion insofar has shown how ideas that facilitate a sense of meaning can radically alter a person's moral cognitions such that the violent endeavour can be perceived as justifiable. The members' motivations for the pursuit of violent *jihad* is consonant with research on militant-extremism thinking (Moghaddam, 2005; Saucier, et.al., 2009). For example, the motivations derived from the present findings resonate with Ryan's (2007) study on the four key elements underlying the process of Islamist radicalisation: Persecution, Piety, Predecessor and Perseverance (4Ps).

The present findings are also consistent with trends on homegrown radicalisation where individuals need not experience personal injustice to engage in violence. Instead, individuals can be motivated to engage in retaliatory behaviour on behalf of the *ummah* (Greer, Berman, Varan, Bobrycki & Watson, 2005; Fischer). Hence, from a social identity perspective, the perceived injustices over the sufferings of fellow Muslims in conflict zones can generate feelings of 'humiliation-by-proxy' (Khosrokhavar, 2005), and thus create conditions that can motivate radicalized individuals to seek revenge.

Some limitations in the present study indicate caution is warranted in generalizing the findings, particularly given its relatively small sample size. In addition, the exercise of relying on open-source information demonstrates the inevitability that capturing the actual thought of extremists as it relates to their radicalisation process will remain incomplete. Notwithstanding, the conversation-excerpts did provide the critical context necessary to delineate the conditions, particularly the social interaction dynamics (Veldhius & Staun, 2009), which provided a glimpse of how radical ideas are processed, and how they permit a departure from normal norms such that violence can be regarded as justified under certain circumstances. These observations have proven valuable in substantiating the findings of the present study.

In short, the present study has shown that attempts to derive meaning, from biased assumptions, are not sustainable. For instance, to achieve a desired future purpose (e.g., prevent future atrocities against Muslims in conflict zones), extremists compromised their moral intentions (e.g., by justifying indiscriminate violence against innocents). In other words, biasing one need for meaning can impair other needs for meaning, and thus impede attempts to forge a sense of meaning *overall*. Clearly, an in-depth examination of this 'paradoxical effect' is needed so as to shed light on the question of why the search for meaning in life, can sometimes (unfortunately) translate to radicalisation.

References

- Almond, G.A., Appleby, R.S., & Sivan, E. (2003). *Strong Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3, 193-209.
- Bakker, E. (2006). *Jihadi terrorists in Europe: Their characteristics and circumstances in which they joined the jihad: An exploratory study*. Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations.
- Baumeister, R. F. (1991). *The meanings of life*. New York: Guilford.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Beck, A. (2002). Prisoners of hate. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 40, 209-216.
- Benbrika & Ors., VSC 21 (2009)
- Cooke, D. (2005, December 16). Two talked of killing PM, court told. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved on January 24 2011, from <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/two-talked-of-killing-pm-court/2005/12/16/1134676443616.html>
- Corden, A. and Sainsbury, R. (2005c) *The Impact of Verbatim Quotations on Research Users: Qualitative exploration*, York: Social Policy Research Unit, University of York.
- Dalgaard-Nielsen, A. (2010). Violent radicalization in Europe: What we know and what we do not know. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33, 797-814.
- Debats, D.L. (1999). Sources of Meaning: An Investigation of Significant Commitments in Life. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 39, 30-57.
- Exline, J.J. (2002). Stumbling blocks on the religious road: Fractured relationships, nagging vices, and the inner struggle to believe. *Psychological Inquiry*, 13, 182-189.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson.
- Francis, L.J. & Hills, P.R. (2007). The development of the Meaning in Life Index (MILI) and its relationship with personality and religious behaviors and beliefs among UK undergraduate students. *Mental health, Religion & Culture*, 11, 211-220.

- Frankl, V. (1984). *Man's search for meaning*. NY: Washington Square Press.
- Fischer, P., Haslam, S.A., & Smith, L. (2010). "If you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" Social identity salience moderates support for retaliation in response to collective threat. *Group dynamics: Theory, Research and Practice*, 14, 143-150.
- Gibbs, S. (2005). Islam and Islamic Extremism: An existential analysis. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 45, 156-203.
- Gratta, M. (2005, August 5). I must preach holy war, says teacher. *The Age*. Retrieved on 30 December 2010 from <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2005/08/04/1123125857077.html?from=top5>
- Greer, T., Berman, M., Varan, V., Bobrycki, L. & Watson, S. (2005). We are a religious people: We are a vengeful people. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44, 45-57.
- Haggarty, L. (1995). The use of content analysis to explore conversations between school teacher mentors and student teachers. *British educational research journal*, 21, 183-197.
- Heine, S.J., Proulx, T., & Vohs, K.D. (2010). The meaning maintenance model: On the coherence of social motivations. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10, 88-110.
- Hoffman, B. (2009). Radicalization and subversion: Al Qaeda and the 7 July 2005 bombings and the 2006 airline bombing plot. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 32, 1100-1116.
- Jacobsen, M. (2010). *Terrorist Dropouts: Learning from Those Who Have Left*. Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy.
- Johnson, P. (2008, September 16) *Damning transcripts made public* [Radio broadcast]. Australia: 3AW693 News Talk. [Transcript]. Retrieved 24, January 2011, from <http://www.3aw.com.au/damning-transcripts-made-public/20080916-4hr.html? page=1>
- Kepel, G. (2004). *The war for Muslim minds: Islam and the West*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Khosrokhavar, F. (2005). *Suicide bombers: Allah's new martyrs*. London: Pluto Press.
- Kirby, A. (2007). The London bombers as "self-starters": A case study in indigenous radicalization and the emergence of autonomous cliques. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30, 415-428.

Kissane, K. (2008, August 14). Closing time. *The Age*. Retrieved on 30 December 2010 from <http://www.theage.com.au/national/closing-time-20080813-3v42.html>

Krunglanski, A.W., Chen, X., Dechesne, M., Fishman, S. & Orehel, E. (2009). Fully committed: Suicide bombers' motivation and the quest for personal significance. *Political Psychology*, 30, 331-357.

Mascaro, N. & Rosen, D.H. (2006). The role of existential meaning as a buffer against stress. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 46, 168-190.

Moghaddam, F.M. (2006). *From the terrorists' point of view: what they experience and why they come to destroy*. Praeger Security International, Westport, Connecticut.

Moor, K. (2008, September 17) Terror down under. *Herald Sun*. Retrieved January 24 2011, from <http://heraldsunonline.com.au/terror/index.html>

Moskalenko, S. & McCauley, C. (2009). Measuring political mobilization: The distinction between activism and radicalism. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 21, 239-260.

Pargament, K.I. (2009). The bitter and the sweet: An evaluation of the costs and benefits of religiousness. *Psychological Inquiry*, 13, 168-181.

Porter, L.E. & Kebbell, M.R. (2010). Radicalization in Australia: Examining Australia's convicted terrorists. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, First published on: 11 June 2010 (iFirst).

Pyszczynski, T., Abdollahi, A., Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., Cohen, F., & Weise, D. (2006). Mortality salience, martyrdom, and military might: The great satan versus the axis of evil. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32, 525-537.

R v Atik., VSC 299 (2007)

R v Benbrika & Ors., VSC 21 (2009).

R v Benbrika & Ors., VSCA 281 (2010).

R v The Queen., VSCA 281 (2010)

Ross, N. (2008, February 15). Jihad tapes played to terror trial jury. *Herald Sun*. Retrieved on December 30 2010 from <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/terror-accused-on-lebanon-list-court-told/story-e6frf7kx-1111115559977>

- Ryan, J. (2007). The four P-words of militant Islamist radicalization and recruitment: Persecution, Precedent, Piety, and Perseverance. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30, 985-1011.
- Sageman, M. (2008). A strategy for fighting international Islamic terrorists. *The annals of the American Academy of Political Science*, 618, 223-231.
- Saucier, G., Akers, L.G., Shen-Miller, S., Knezevic, G., & Stankov, L. (2009). Patterns of thinking in militant extremism. *Perspectives on psychological science*, 4, 256-271.
- Silber, M.D., & Bhatt, A. (2007). *Radicalization in the West: The home grown threat*. New York: New York Police Department.
- Silke, A. (2008). Holy warriors: Exploring the psychological processes of *jihadi* radicalization. *European Journal of Criminology*, 5, 99-123.
- Stankov, L., Higgins, D., Saucier, G., & Knezevic, G. (2010). Contemporary militant extremism: A linguistic approach to scale development. *Psychological Assessment*, 22, 246-258.
- Steger, M.F., Pickering, N.K., Adams, E., Burnett, J., Shin, J.Y., Dik, B.J., & Stauner, N. (2010). The quest for meaning: Religious affiliation differences in the correlates of religious quest and search for meaning in life. *Psychology of religion and spirituality*, 2, 206-226.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. London: Sage.
- Sullivan, D., Landau, M., & Rothschild, Z. K. (2010). An existential function of enemyship: Evidence that people attribute influence to personal and political enemies to compensate for threats to control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98, 434-449.
- Taylor, M. & Horgan, J. (2006). A conceptual framework for addressing psychological process in the development of the terrorist. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18, 585-601.
- Tiliouine, H. & Belgoumidi, A. (2009). An exploratory study of religiosity, meaning in life and subjective wellbeing in Muslim students from Algeria. *Applied research quality life*, 4, 109-127.
- Veldhuis, T. & Staun, J. (2009). *Islamist radicalisation: A root cause model*. Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations.