

The Resilience of Radicalism: Strategies for reducing dissonance and sustaining extremist attitudes

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Abstract

This article provides an empirically-backed account of the diverse ways radicalised individuals respond to experiences of dissonance. It investigates why certain dissonance-inducing experiences—such as counter-ideological evidence or positive intergroup contact—trigger disengagement in some individuals while leaving others unaffected. Drawing on in-depth interviews with former extremists, this study identifies specific dissonance characteristics and resolution strategies employed by radicalised individuals that facilitate such a ‘resilience of radicalism’. Understanding these mechanisms can inform the design of targeted interventions to inhibit defensive and reinforcing coping strategies and better leverage the potential for inducing cognitive dissonance as a catalyst for attitudinal change.

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1. Introduction

This article identifies and provides empirical examples of the diverse strategies radicalised individuals employ to reduce cognitive dissonance without abandoning extremism. While the mechanisms of dissonance reduction have been well-documented in psychology since the 1950s, they have not been systematically explored within the field of Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism (PCVE) and Counter-Terrorism (CT). Cognitive dissonance theory offers a framework with significant explanatory and applied potential for this field. Understanding these mechanisms can facilitate the design of targeted interventions that both induce dissonance as a catalyst for attitudinal change and inhibit the defensive or reinforcing coping strategies that maintain radical commitment.

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Current PCVE and CT literature has identified numerous factors that can lead individuals away from extremism.² Frequently mentioned drivers include unmet expectations, competing loyalties, family or social pressures, social isolation or lack of integration, and cost-benefit calculations such as the fear of repression or the allure of amnesty. Other factors include life transitions—such as parenthood or further education—as well as psychological catalysts like burnout, trauma, empathy, and regret. Despite the breadth of these factors, their effectiveness remains inconsistent.

This article explores the underlying psychological mechanisms—specifically, the diverse responses to cognitive dissonance—that influence why such experiences lead to disengagement and deradicalisation in some cases but fail in others. Drawing on a series of in-depth interviews with former extremists from varied ideological milieus, this study highlights instances where such potential exit factors failed to trigger disengagement, or even resulted in individuals entrenching further into their extremist attitudes. The extent to which these factors contribute to disengagement depends largely on the characteristics of the experienced dissonance and the strategies available to the individual to resolve it.

Specifically, this article identifies three key characteristics that influence the impact of dissonance: its relative magnitude, its centrality to the individual's extremist beliefs, and its persistence across time and context. Furthermore, the text examines and provides examples of how radicalised individuals reduce dissonance through strategies such as adding or adapting consonant cognitions, attributing dissonance to a different source, or making sacrifices to preserve ideological consistency. This article also stresses that, in most cases, deradicalisation is not a result of a single experience of dissonance; rather, it is typically a cumulative effect of multiple dissonant experiences potentiated by favourable circumstantial and contextual factors which lead to a gradual shift in attitude.

Applying dissonance theory to disengagement and deradicalisation allows to leverage both its explanatory and applied potential. While many current prevention and exit programs already utilise dissonance—for example by formulating counter-narratives or mobilising conflicting social ties—they usually do so without explicit reference to this theory. A direct

² See: Altier, Thoroughgood and Horgan 2014; Bjørge and Horgan 2009; Daase, Deitelhoff and Junk 2019; Davis and Cragin 2009; Doosje et al. 2016; Fitz-Gibbon 2016; Görzig 2012; Hansen and Lid 2020; Horgan 2009; Kenney and Hwang 2021; Nacos 2016; Renner and Spencer 2012. Different authors ascribe diverging weights to such factors.

engagement with dissonance theory allows PCVE and CT programmes to benefit from decades of experimental findings regarding its strategic use, such as the *induced hypocrisy* paradigm. To design effective interventions, it is crucial to understand and attempt to inhibit the defensive responses that result in reactance and prevent attitudinal change.

The subsequent section discusses the methods and limitations of this study. The third section provides a theoretical overview of dissonance theory, including its psychological formulations and experimental applications for attitudinal change. It also reviews the existing, albeit limited, literature on dissonance within the context of PCVE and CT. The fourth section describes and provides empirical examples of the characteristics of dissonance and the strategies used by individuals to resolve it. The article concludes with a discussion of the practical applications of these findings for PCVE and CT practitioners.

2. Methods and limitations

This article is part of a larger ongoing project—funded by the German Research Foundation (grant number: 528853785)—investigating the broader subject of contradictions related to extremism. The research strictly adheres to ethical guidelines and best practice recommendations of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA), with all participants providing informed consent. Details about most of the participants have been anonymised, with the exception of those who—after discussing potential foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences—explicitly requested to use their real names.³

This article draws on three sources of empirical data: in-depth interviews with former extremists conducted by the author, a secondary dataset of interviews with former extremists, and informal interviews with PCVE and CT practitioners.

I conducted a total of fifteen (N = 15) in-depth, sometimes repeated, interviews with former extremists living in the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Romania, South Africa, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Purposive and snowball sampling were employed to recruit

³ This corresponds with anthropological best practice guidelines: ‘(...) anthropologists should recognise that participants may wish to have their names included, even in publications, and this should not be denied to them in the name of ethics’ (ASA 2021, 5). For an overview of socio-anthropological disciplinary methodological and analytical specificity see: Atkinson et al. 2001, Eriksen 2001, Denzin 1997, Fontana and Finch 2003, and Hammersley and Atkinson 2007.

interviewees. I conducted all interviews myself and am fluent in the required languages (English, Spanish, German and Polish), ensuring that the nuances of the participants' cognitions were not lost in translation. Five of the interviewees were women and ten were men. The ages of all participants ranged between 19 and 55. These interviews took place in quiet environments with minimal outside interference to facilitate focus and privacy. The depth of the inquiry required significant time, with interviews ranging from 90 minutes to 6 hours in duration.

The semi-structured interviews utilised a life-story focus: beginning by establishing the participant's life context—including their upbringing, education, family, social, and economic situation—and proceeded chronologically through their life trajectory. Within this narrative framework, particular attention was paid to instances of dissonance or broader incoherences or contradictions in relation to radicalisation and subsequent disengagement and deradicalisation.

A further fifteen interviews (N = 15) were accessed through the 'Formers' project led by Prof. Tore Bjørgo at the Center for Research on Extremism, University of Oslo.⁴ These are shorter and contain some, but less specific details relevant to experiences of dissonance. While this entire dataset was coded along the primary interviews and included in the broader analysis to ensure thematic saturation, this article primarily features empirical examples from the interviews I conducted personally, with a passing mention of only one example from the 'Formers' dataset.

Simultaneously, I conducted informal interviews with PCVE and CT practitioners throughout the research process. These discussions included explicit questions regarding their professional experiences in working with practices that could be framed as evoking dissonance, as well as their experiences in identifying cognitive dissonance among their clients. I also consulted with several such practitioners regarding my initial findings. This provided an additional layer of triangulation of the data derived from the former extremists themselves.

The collected materials were coded using Atlas.ti software through an iterative and interpretive approach. The initial transcription and open coding focused on identifying

⁴ Following translation and anonymisation, as well as a further consultation with those interviewees who consented to it, several transcripts of the interviews conducted by myself will be included in the 'Formers' dataset in the near future. See the project webpage: <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/formers/>

specific instances of responses to dissonance. It was subsequently possible to distinguish and categorise these responses, specifically identifying the general context in which dissonance occurred, different types of responses to it, and whether dissonance was sustained over time or fleeting. The final analysis tested the emergent themes against the data and academic literature (described in the next section) until a coherent framework was established.

It is important to acknowledge the inherent limitations of this research. Reaching a conclusive determination of causality for internal psychological phenomena like dissonance is often impossible, rendering suggested models and mechanisms inevitably partial and tentative. Furthermore, relying on interviews with persons who have successfully deradicalised constitutes a form of *survivorship bias*: the findings reflect the experiences of those whose characteristics or circumstances facilitated their departure, and we cannot know if those who remain radicalised respond differently to dissonance, or perhaps if they utilise the strategies described below more efficiently. Finally, while the details of the life stories cannot be verified independently, the plausibility of these accounts—supported by the observation of similar experiences across different persons and by secondary confirmation from PCVE and CT practitioners—makes them apt illustrations of the dynamics of cognitive dissonance.

3. Dissonance theory

3.1. Dissonance in psychological literature

Leon Festinger's foundational model (1957) defined cognitive dissonance as the psychological discomfort arising from inconsistent or conflicting cognitions (beliefs, attitudes, values, or behaviours). The intensity of this discomfort depends on the importance the individual attributes to these cognitions and the magnitude of the conflict between them. To alleviate this distress, individuals are driven to restore consistency by changing their behaviours, modifying existing cognitions, modifying their perceived importance, or adding new consonant cognitions. Later models expanded this framework, proposing that dissonance also arises from inconsistencies between behaviour and one's self-concept (Aronson 1969), threats to one's perception of oneself as a moral person (Steele 1988), responsibility for actions with negative consequences (Cooper & Fazio 1984), or from assessment of one's behaviour against personal or socio-cultural normative standards (Stone and Cooper 2000).

Crucially, the drive to reduce dissonance can lead to counter-intuitive outcomes where beliefs are strengthened rather than abandoned. In their study of a doomsday cult, Festinger, Riecken and Schachter (1956) showed that when deep-seated beliefs are contradicted by reality, individuals may proselytise and entrench themselves further to find social validation rather than admit error. Similarly, individuals often resolve *post-decisional dissonance* (Brehm 1956) or justify the effort spent towards a disappointing outcome (Aronson and Mills 1959) by retrospectively increasing their valuation of the chosen path. Furthermore, Steele (1988) argued that resolution need not address the specific conflict directly; individuals can restore a sense of self-integrity by affirming unrelated positive values—for example, dismissing a moral failure in one area by emphasising one’s loyalty or competence in another.

For PCVE and CT contexts, the role of perceived freedom of choice is paramount. Research on *induced compliance*—forcing someone to make statements or perform acts that violate their judgement—consistently indicates that attitude change is significantly greater when participants believe they freely chose to perform a counter-attitudinal act (Festinger and Carlsmith 1959, Helmreich and Collins 1968, Ashmore and Collins 1968, Beauvois, Bungert and Mariette 1995). Conversely, external coercion often fails to produce internalised change.

Finally, the theory is not immune to criticism regarding methodological and conceptual standardisation, as well as the relatively low comparability of results and predictive power (Vaidis and Bran 2019). Even more broadly, the *principle of consistency*—often assumed to be causal and functional across neuropsychology, cognition, and behaviour—could also be put into question (van Kempen 2019). Overall, however, the framework remains robust. While individuals may not always strive for consistency of beliefs across contexts (as I also observed regarding the use of conflicting social identities—see Kurzwelly 2019), this is often because such incoherences remain situationally separate and thus latent, failing to trigger dissonance. Furthermore, individual differences, such as *tolerance for ambiguity* (Furnham and Marks 2013), influence the intensity of the experienced discomfort. Despite such critiques, the mechanisms of dissonance reduction remain a potent lens for understanding cognition in the context of extremism.

3.2. *Dissonance as a tool for attitudinal change*

Theory of dissonance has led to numerous applications aiming to catalyse attitudinal

change. These interventions typically generate internal motivation by making existing conflicting cognitions salient, rather than relying solely on external persuasion. A prominent approach is the *induced hypocrisy* paradigm, which highlights the inconsistency between an individual's espoused values and their past transgressions to prompt attitudinal and behavioural adjustment. A meta-analysis by Priolo et al. (2019) confirms the effectiveness of this method across diverse domains, ranging from safe sex and public health (Aronson et al. 1991), environmental conservation (Dickerson et al. 1992), to the reduction of implicit racial prejudice (Son Hing et al. 2002).

Crucially, the change observed amongst those participants of such studies who were in the 'hypocrisy condition', is reportedly driven by a specific need to restore self-integrity. Participants who publicly advocate for a prosocial norm while simultaneously acknowledging their past failures to uphold it experience a profound threat to their self-concept as moral, consistent actors. To resolve this dissonance, they tend to engage in direct compensatory behaviours to align their actions with their espoused values. In the above mentioned studies, students did not merely express an intention to improve, but also took concrete steps, such as actively purchasing condoms or significantly shortening their showers. This highlights that when dissonance affects the core of one's self-perception, the drive for resolution can produce tangible behavioural shifts—provided the individual does not opt for the defensive strategies described later in this article.

Recent technological developments have further expanded these applications. For instance, Costello et al. (2024) demonstrated that dialogues with specifically prompted AI chatbots were able to reduce belief in conspiracy theories by an average of 20%. Crucially, the intervention was most effective when the AI provided factual counter-evidence, challenging the conventional assumption that facts alone cannot sway entrenched beliefs (Costello et al. 2025 preprint).⁵ This suggests that tailored, fact-based counter-narratives might similarly reach those holding extremist ideologies.

While I was unable to find any studies that would explicitly test inducing dissonance in the context of PCVE or CT, the principle implicitly underpins much of the field's practical work. In my interviews with diverse practitioners in this field, they described various

⁵ Similarly, Ryoo et al. (2025) showed that AI can be useful in public health campaigns against marijuana-impaired driving through hypocrisy induction. In this case the effects were reportedly most pronounced when the chatbot's gender and linguistic style were aligned with user expectations.

interventions—such as exercises requiring violent extremists to view actions through the eyes of their victims, or unexpected acts of kindness from penitentiary staff who are viewed as enemies by terrorism-convicts—that function by generating dissonance to catalyse doubt. Explicitly framing these intuitive practices within dissonance theory would allow the field to better leverage decades of research on attitudinal change.

3.3. *Dissonance in literature on radicalisation and deradicalisation*

Cognitive dissonance, and the assumed human drive for internal consistency, frequently appear in the literature on radicalisation and deradicalisation, though often implicitly and without reference to the above-described theories. For instance, Hogg (2014) and Hogg, Kruglanski, and van den Bos (2013) argued that ‘self-uncertainty’ motivates individuals to identify with groups that offer rigid identities and clear behavioural prescriptions. By providing cognitive closure, these groups allow individuals to reduce uncertainty and regain a sense of meaning and control—psychological drivers often cited as preconditions for extremism. Similarly, D’Lima (2019) contended that personal uncertainty increases religious zeal and the willingness to support religious warfare, suggesting that interventions should aim to increase *tolerance of ambiguity*. In a similar vein, I have previously argued that the essentialist view of social identities—fundamental to many extremist ideologies—fulfils existential needs by providing a positive self-evaluation, a simplified moral framework, and clear agency, all of which anchor the sense of personal identity and generate a sense of certainty and belonging (Kurzwelley, Fernana and Ngum 2020).

While direct references to Festinger’s theory are less common, several key texts explicitly refer to cognitive dissonance. Nilsson (2022a; 2022b), in his study of Swedish jihadists, posited dissonance as a causal mechanism for radicalisation. He illustrated how recruiters leveraged the acute dissonance between a recruits’ spiritual beliefs (the obligation to defend the *ummah*, the abstract community of Muslims) and their inconsistent behaviour (inaction in the face of perceived injustice) to motivate engagement in violence. Van den Bos (2018) similarly argued that the dissonance arising from the conflict between the societal promise of equal treatment and the lived reality of unfairness is a key driver of radicalisation.

Maikovich (2005) went further, framing the entire radicalisation trajectory towards

terrorism as a series of dissonance-reduction mechanisms. She argued that gradual social isolation functions to reduce dissonance by avoiding contradictory perspectives. Simultaneously, adopting a binary ‘good vs. evil’ worldview increases consonant cognitions that legitimise drastic measures. Furthermore, the adoption of a ‘just world bias’—the assumption that people get what they deserve—allows individuals to reframe aggressive acts as defensive or retributive, thereby neutralising the moral dissonance associated with violence against innocents.

Conversely, as Nilsson (2022a; 2022b) noted, dissonance can not only catalyse radicalisation but also motivate exit from extremism. He described instances where a jihadi group induced dissonance among its members by violating religious prohibitions against killing other Muslims. Particularly noteworthy is Dalgaard-Nielsen’s 2013 article, which classified voluntary leavers into three clusters: those leaving due to ideological doubt; those disillusioned with the group or leadership; and those driven by mundane, practical reasons such as ‘burnout, frontline fatigue, growing older, missing loved ones, longing for a normal life, or feeling guilty about the impact of one’s extremism on friends and family’ (Ibid., 105). Based on these observations, Dalgaard-Nielsen argued for the potential of leveraging dissonance in deradicalisation interventions—a perspective echoed by this article.

However, Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013) also cautioned against the risk of the ‘boomerang effect’, or reactance. *Reactance* describes a defensive response where individuals, perceiving a threat to their freedom or beliefs, reassert agency by entrenching themselves further. Vicente (2022) illustrated this dynamic among young jihadists in Spain, showing how confrontation by significant others often led them to distance themselves socially and reinforce their radical convictions. This aligns with the findings on induced compliance discussed earlier: for dissonance to trigger positive change rather than reactance, the individual must perceive their actions to be a result of their own free will.

Building on this literature, this article poses a further question: how do the specific characteristics of dissonance, and the diverse strategies individuals employ to reduce it, influence the persistence or abandonment of extremist attitudes? A nuanced understanding of these mechanisms is essential for designing targeted interventions that effectively prevent and counter extremism.

4. Extremists' responses to dissonance

Radicalised individuals, much like the general population, experience dissonance that generates pressure for resolution. Ideally, experiences of dissonance can lead individuals to abandon their extremist behaviours and attitudes entirely, as illustrated by the below-described story of Joanna, who deradicalised under the influence of a single event that triggered significant psychological discomfort. However, as becomes evident through further examples, deradicalisation is rarely such a straightforward process. A range of favourable conditions, specific characteristics of the dissonance itself, and various resolution strategies play a role in facilitating such an effect. In most cases, individuals do not easily relinquish their core beliefs; instead, they resort to numerous strategies to reduce the discomfort of dissonance without mounting a significant challenge to their extremism. This section examines the factors that influence the effectiveness—or ineffectiveness—of dissonant experiences on the processes of disengagement and deradicalisation. Each of such factors is illustrated with one or more examples from the conducted interviews.

Festinger (1957, 28) posited that the magnitude (or intensity) of experienced psychological discomfort directly influences the need for reduction, suggesting that the higher the magnitude, the more likely the dissonance will overcome an individual's resistance to change. Individuals may resolve this dissonance by changing behavioural or environmental cognitive elements, or by adding new consonant cognitions—essentially by altering their actions, manipulating their environment, or introducing new justifications (Ibid., 18–24). While the examples reported by former extremists in this study can be framed within this general conceptualisation, I propose a more detailed typology of dissonance characteristics and reduction strategies. For example, factors such as centrality, persistence across time and context, or the level of threat to self-esteem and identity could all be viewed as components influencing the general 'magnitude' of dissonance. However, as will be evident in the second example of Dominik, this is not necessarily the case—a dissonance of high magnitude does not need to be central to the overall framework, and it is thus beneficial to discuss these separately. It is also beneficial to delineate the different characteristics and strategies separately to facilitate a more comprehensive framework for PCVE and CT operationalisation. It is important to keep in mind, however, that while these characteristics

are described individually, in practice they are often deeply entangled, and the constituent elements could be categorised or grouped together in diverse ways.

4.1. Abandoning extremist attitudes and behaviours

Ideally, dissonance that engages a person's extremist attitudes or behaviours can have a disengaging and deradicalising effect. The story of Joanna serves as a prime example of this potential. Joanna, who radicalised into neo-Nazism as a teenager in a small town in Poland, was committed enough to adopt a skinhead appearance, display portraits of Hitler in her room, and tattoo a swastika and other symbols on her body. Her deradicalisation in response to a strong experience of dissonance was remarkably swift. During her first trip abroad to visit a relative in England, she attended a social gathering with people from diverse non-European backgrounds. Interacting with these individuals directly contradicted her assumptions regarding the supposed inferiority of non-white populations. She recalled that shortly after beginning a conversation with a young man of South Asian origin, she was forced to question her beliefs, finding him surprisingly intelligent and eloquent. After several such interactions over just a few days, she returned to Poland, challenged her neo-Nazi peers, and severed all ties within several weeks.

Joanna's story is in that sense both an anomaly within the interviews collected for this project and could be seen as a 'blueprint' of sorts, indicative of conditions that PCVE and CT practice can learn from. What separates her case from other interviewees is the constellation of overall favourable situational conditions against the background of which dissonance occurred. In other words, her encounter with the 'Other', which challenged a core axiom of her ideological framework, did not occur in isolation but was potentiated by highly favourable contextual circumstances. At the moment of the encounter she was in a new environment, geographically removed from the immediate influence of her neo-Nazi peer group. Crucially, she was not wearing any symbols that would have enforced her radical identity, and her tattoos were concealed from view, preventing an antagonistic dynamic from the outset. Furthermore, because the people she met were friends of a relative, social norms necessitated mutual respect, which facilitated a friendly atmosphere.

Beyond the immediate encounter, Joanna's broader life context also played an essential role. Unlike many radicalised persons, she had retained her other social ties and was seldom

challenged by her family.⁶ She saw herself, and was seen by others, through multiple social identities; her sense of self-worth was not exclusively anchored in neo-Nazism. Her group belonging was also not tied to her subsistence or personal safety, making the ‘exit costs’ of cutting ties relatively low. Thus, Joanna’s case serves as an indicative model: when the magnitude of dissonance is high and the immediate surrounding environmental and social factors and the general life context reduce the cost of disengagement and deradicalisation, it becomes a viable path.

4.2. Relative centrality and magnitude of dissonance

The effects of cognitive dissonance are shaped by the importance of the dissonant cognitions to the individual’s (and group’s) overall ideological framework—whether the experienced dissonance threatens key axioms, or is only tangential. The story of Dominik offers an example of high-magnitude dissonance that challenged a personally important belief but one that was not fundamental to the entirety of his worldview, resulting in only a partial disengaging and deradicalising effect.

Dominik lived in a major Polish city and since early adolescence gradually adopted strong far-right nationalist attitudes alongside involvement in the fandom of a local football club. These activities were intertwined with football hooliganism, anti-migrant and other general xenophobic sentiments. Many of the activities involved non-violent proselytism, combined with social activism—such as organising ‘patriotic marches’, supporting a few still living veterans of the Second World War, or organising aid for descendants of Poles who were forcibly relocated to the Soviet Union after the war. An important part of his activism also involved fixating on homophobic attitudes, believing homosexuality to be a deviancy spread by a Western-liberal political agenda that posed a risk to Polish and Christian values. He described committing acts of property destruction, targeting objects displaying the rainbow flag, as well as bullying and harassment.

⁶ While the presence and character of social ties outside the extremist milieu are often considered significant factors influencing the likelihood of disengagement and deradicalisation, such ties are not inherently protective. In the context of Salafi-Jihadism in Spain, Vicente (2022) described how individuals resisted the influence of conflicting social connections when others attempted to induce desistance through argumentation, disapproval, or the enforcement of social norms. While some suppressed or avoided the resulting conflict, others gradually distanced themselves from family members or friends, increasingly viewing them as members of an out-group. Thus, while conflicting social ties can facilitate deradicalisation, they can also lead to reactance, effectively strengthening extremist attitudes and beliefs.

He experienced a profound dissonance when a close relative confided in him about their sexual orientation. ‘How can a loved family member, “my blood”, be gay?’ he recalled thinking. This experience, combined with embarking on studying psychology at a local university and attending lectures on sexuality, convinced him that homosexuality was normal. While his attitudes on this specific subject changed completely, it had no effect on his other nationalistic attitudes and activities within his peer-group. He remains active in his group, participating in ‘patriotic marches’ and campaigns, such as the support for Janusz Waluś—a Polish citizen who murdered Chris Hani, the general secretary of the South African Communist Party, in 1993 and received a warm welcome from Polish nationalists upon his release from prison and return to Poland in 2024. Dominik sees himself as deradicalised because he moved away from his previous homophobia, yet his case underscores that when dissonant cognitions are not central to the overall framework, they may only result in a pivot, a ‘partial deradicalisation’, rather than a complete departure from all extremist attitudes. Dominik reprioritised shifting his efforts onto nationalistic, anti-migrant and transphobic proselytism and activities.

In the cases of both Joanna and of Dominik, the magnitude of experienced dissonance was high. However, in the latter case, the dissonance was central to only part of his extremist beliefs and attitudes. Furthermore, not only Dominik but also his peer group demonstrated a degree of attitudinal flexibility. The group was able to accept Dominik’s change of beliefs on this specific issue, and the topic was strategically avoided so as not to cause tension with members who kept harbouring homophobic attitudes. This case also underscores a broader point that is worth noting for PCVE and CT practice, especially with the recent increased attention to the ‘mixed, unclear, and unstable’ or ‘salad-bar’ types of extremism—a person’s ‘ideological framework’ ought not to be assumed to be a coherent whole which can be undermined by countering only a part of it.

4.3. Persistence across time and context

Another factor influencing the impact of dissonance is its persistence across both time and context. In some cases, dissonance that is both central and strong in magnitude can have

little effect if it is a single occurrence that can be easily dismissed. David Saavedra,⁷ who spent over twenty years in Spanish neo-Nazi organisations, provides an apt illustration. David grew up in a mid-sized town on the Atlantic coast and began radicalising as a teenager, gradually cutting ties with family and friends who disapproved of his newfound ideology. He adapted ever more aspects of his life to being a neo-Nazi, expanding his initial focus on proselytism into other activities and, ultimately, plans for violence. He took a job in the Spanish military, seeing it as suitable for supporting his national-socialist activities, as it provided sufficient free time and the possibility of relocating to Madrid.

Particularly relevant to this section is his recollection of a dissonant experience during an ‘ideological pilgrimage’ to Germany. While walking the streets of Munich with a ‘comrade’, he observed a group of disruptive, drunk individuals from a distance. Assuming they were migrants, he commented on how such outsiders spoil the well-organised ‘white’ society of Germany. Upon getting closer, he realised they were all Spaniards. David recalled this as a moment of intense psychological discomfort. He viewed Germany through the lens of his belief in the racial superiority of whiteness, a category in which he also included Spanish people. The act of mistakenly affirming disruptive Spaniards as ‘inferior’ non-white migrants, while in the context of this very positive view of Germany, forced him to temporarily doubt his assumption of the equal superiority of Spaniards. While he described this experience as affecting him for several days, because it was a single, isolated experience of dissonance, it was easy to ignore and return to previous habits and routines. It was only years later that the memory of this event returned in the context of other doubts, the accumulation of which ultimately forced him to initiate the long and painful process of disengagement and deradicalisation (described below).

4.4. Threat to self-esteem and identity

A critical characteristic of dissonance that determines its potential for attitudinal change is the extent to which it threatens an individual’s sense of self-worth and one’s identities. David Saavedra’s story again provides an apt example. His extremist trajectory moved toward violent action, including the planning of a political assassination. Along with

⁷ Besides two lengthy interviews with David, this account also draws from his published memoir—see Saavedra 2021.

several ‘comrades’, he began planning to murder a left-leaning politician whom they saw as a particular threat to the ‘white race’. Several overlapping forms of dissonance prevented him from realising these plans, some of which directly challenged his self-concept.

Conceptually, David struggled to reconcile his justifications for the planned murder with his knowledge that ETA, the Basque separatist group he viewed as despicable terrorists, utilised identical strategies. This posed a direct threat to his identity as a ‘national socialist’; if his actions mirrored those of his enemies, how could he maintain the belief that he belonged to a ‘superior’ category of being? Furthermore, he was haunted by the dissonant realisation that such an act would lead to long-term imprisonment, completely separating him from his mother—a persistent thought he attempted to suppress by framing it as a ‘necessary sacrifice’ required to become a ‘truly worthy Nazi’.

The magnitude of this discomfort was amplified by what is termed ‘vicarious cognitive dissonance’ (Norton et al. 2003; Cooper and Hogg 2007), which occurs when individuals witness members of their in-group engage in behaviour that violates their espoused ideals. A profound sense of repulsion emerged after one of David’s co-conspirators decided to ‘practice’ the logistics of an assassination by killing a stray dog, loading the cadaver into a car trunk with plastic foil, and burying it in a forest. David, a devoted animal lover, found this act impossible to reconcile with his moral standards, forcing him to question the character of his comrades and, by extension, the group identity he had so carefully cultivated. None of these kinds of dissonance David experienced in the context of planning a political assassination were sufficient in and of themselves to push him towards disengagement and deradicalisation, yet they were significant factors that ultimately did overlap with other doubts and led David to abandon not only such plans but his extremist beliefs and behaviours all together (as described below).

Similar accounts of *vicarious dissonance* appear frequently in other interviews. A Pakistani Islamist who received military training in Afghanistan and was committed to the struggle for Kashmir, for instance, recalled how his idealised views were shattered while lying sick and feverish in a mountain camp. His fellow fighters treated him with cold contempt while simultaneously mistreating captured Muslims. Other examples include a Greek neo-Nazi who, upon seeing his comrades both taking and selling drugs, something he saw as fundamentally contradicting his national-socialist ideals of bodily purity, began a process of

deradicalisation.⁸ These experiences of moral hypocrisy within the in-group often act as a critical catalyst for doubt, as they strike at the foundational belief in the group's inherent righteousness.

4.5. Adding or adapting consonant or dissonant cognitions

A pervasive strategy for sustaining extremism in the face of contradiction is the addition of new or adapted cognitions to restore internal coherence. These adjustments can at times involve elaborate mental gymnastics to bypass uncomfortable observations, and in other instances, establishing easy automatic responses.

After joining the army, David Saavedra realised that many of his fellow soldiers—whom he categorised via his biologically-determinist ideology as 'Mestizo', as 'mixed-race' and thus as racially inferior—were hard-working, honourable, and trustworthy. 'How could it be that those 'non-white' soldiers behaved better than his 'white' neo-Nazi comrades?', he thought. To resolve the dissonance caused by their admirable behaviour, he adapted his perception of 'mixed-race' people to consider them as 'partially white', reaching the conclusion that these soldiers must possess white genes that dictated their conduct. 'If they, with limited white genes, could behave so well, imagine how proper white people could behave!' he reasoned.

Similarly, when David ordered and received the results of a direct-to-consumer genetic admixture test,⁹ which showed he had Northern African ancestry, undermining his self-concept based in the idea of 'pure whiteness', he initially experienced strong psychological discomfort. He managed to dismiss the result as 'Jewish science', convincing himself that such tests are part of a conspiracy of targeted disinformation aiming at undermining the 'white race'. This provided a solution to this particular instance of dissonance, but also provided a further ready-made response that allowed him to disregard any conflicting scientific evidence. Such adapted and new cognitions allowed him to maintain his racial framework despite the evidence before him and restore a sense of coherence. Only years later

⁸ This example derives from an interview conducted by Robert Orell and was made available to me via the 'Formers' project.

⁹ Such direct-to-consumer tests became popular and cheaply available in recent years, often with the detrimental effect of reifying a false biological understanding of human diversity, leading to racial and racist interpretations (see Phelan et al. 2014, and Roth et al. 2020).

did David recall these instances of dissonance which then contributed to the cumulative process of disengagement and deradicalisation.

These responses relate to *dual-process theories* in psychology, where individuals move from Type 2 (slow, effortful, logical) reasoning to Type 1 (automatic, heuristic-based mental shortcuts) processing.¹⁰ Salma's radicalisation into Salafi Islamism provides another example that illustrates well this Type 1 resolution. During a religious gathering she questioned the religious prohibition against pork: 'Perhaps such a prohibition made sense in the times of the Prophet but now with hygienic and technological advancements why should it still be upheld?' The simple answer she received was: 'We don't eat pork because God knows better.' In consequence, internalising the belief that absolute trust in God requires abstaining from questions and assuming that many reasons might lie beyond human comprehension, she not only resolved her immediate doubt but also established a mental shortcut for any future doubts or inconsistencies. This appeared to effectively close off the possibility of further inquiry, as the answer 'God knows better' became a default response that bypassed logical reasoning.¹¹

These mechanisms also mirror the 'techniques of neutralization' described by Sykes and Matza (1957), where individuals justify acts which they themselves initially perceive as illegitimate to disable internal moral inhibitions. They discerned five techniques of neutralisation that individuals use to justify their actions: (1) denial of responsibility, where an offender views themselves as a victim of circumstances; (2) denial of injury, where they claim no real harm was caused; (3) denial of the victim, where they argue the person deserved the offence; (4) condemnation of the condemners, a method of deflecting blame by criticising those who disapprove; and (5) appeal to higher loyalties, which justifies an action as necessary to uphold a commitment to a group or a higher law or cause. These techniques could be understood as forms of dissonance reduction by adding or adapting one's own

¹⁰ See Wason and Evans 1974, and Petty and Cacioppo 1986 for two foundational dual-process theories; see also Greene et al. 2001 for a neuroscientific fMRI study that showed how some moral dilemmas activated brain regions associated with emotions and social reasoning, while others activated brain regions related to abstract reasoning and working memory; and see Evans and Stanovich 2013 for a discussion of different critiques of dual-process theories.

¹¹ The extent to which Salma was an 'extremist' is debatable, since her attitudes were relatively apolitical (beyond complying with the prohibition against voting), and neither thematised nor endorsed violence. She found appeal in Salafism mostly as a way for spiritual self-improvement. Her overall circle of contacts, however, included some more clearly extremist attitudes, including people who openly expressed their support for ISIS. For a critical philosophical analysis of the term 'extremism' see Cassam 2022.

cognitions. See Vanlerberghe, Verfaillie and Busch (2025) for a discussion of techniques of neutralisation in the context of extremism.

4.6. Changing the relative importance of dissonant cognition

In the face of an experience of dissonance, one can change not only the contents of specific cognitions, as described above, but also their perceived importance. Salma's experience with cycling provides an apt illustration. After years of strictly following Salafi doctrine, she felt a profound sense of boredom and missed activities from her past life. She adapted her life to fulfil all ideological prescriptions for women, but reaching this perceived ideal felt somewhat disappointing. In order to resolve the psychological discomfort, and especially her longing for the one activity she particularly missed—cycling—she concluded that the prohibition against women riding bicycles was merely 'cultural' rather than 'doctrinal'. By reclassifying the norm, she changed the evaluation of its importance; she could cycle again without this activity infringing on her adherence to religious devotion. Initially, this adjustment allowed her to satisfy her desires without challenging her group participation, though she later reflected that this was an early precursor to her eventual exit.

4.7. Changing the perception of consequences

The above example of Salma finding a way to justify cycling is simultaneously an example of a change in the perception of consequences. Before Salma saw breaking such taboos as related to negative spiritual and social consequences. After reaching the conclusion that prohibition against women riding bicycles was only customary, she also changed the perception of the related consequences and saw them as merely socio-cultural in nature, which allowed her to ignore the 'looks' she got from bystanders when cycling.

Luis' story provides another apt example of a shift in the perception of consequences of radical attitudes. As a Peruvian migrant living first in Germany and then in Poland, he experienced numerous instances of racism and discrimination. His desire to combat racism gradually led him to adopt a strategy of confrontation in situations which he perceived as discriminatory, ultimately engaging in violent altercations. A pivotal shift happened after a bar fight left him unconscious with a dislocated shoulder. This experience and the subsequent time spent in hospital and physical therapy—along with being unable to play sports—

reframed violence from a ‘righteous tactic’ to a source of personal detriment. When he later once more confronted a young man in another bar, and saw him visibly traumatised by the altercation, this finally turned the scales. Luis no longer saw his aggression as a victimless or heroic act; the reality of the social and personal consequences finally outweighed his radical motivations, leading him to abandon violence entirely.

4.8. Attributing dissonance to a different source

Dissonance can also be reduced by attributing the source of the discomfort to something that protects the ideological core. One of David Saavedra’s experiences of dissonance, which he retrospectively believes was one of the key constitutive elements of his later deradicalisation, provides a good example. David maintained an unexpected friendship with Miguel, an acquaintance serendipitously made over the internet—one of the few people in David’s life who not only held different political attitudes but also challenged him. For a long time, David perceived this as nothing more than an interesting intellectual exercise, while simultaneously a sense of friendship developed between them. At some point Miguel gave David a wrapped book and asked him to swear on his honour to read it. After unwrapping it at home it turned out to be a book by Karl Marx. Given the honour-based promise David felt compelled to read it, while simultaneously being repelled by what he considered to be a symbol of everything that his ideological attitudes stood against. He found that the actual text of Marx did not correspond to the assumption of it being a ‘source of evil’, as described in neo-Nazi literature. To resolve the intense dissonance and protect his belief in the infallibility of his leaders, he concluded: ‘It must be me. I must be stupid and unworthy.’ By attributing the dissonance to his own intellectual shortcoming, he salvaged the ideology at the cost of his self-worth. This transformation of ideological doubt into self-deprecation highlights the ‘resilience of radicalism,’ where individuals prefer to internalise failure rather than admit a flaw in their worldview.

It is also worth pointing out that some other of the previously introduced examples are also simultaneously cases of attributing dissonance to a different source. (As mentioned before, many of the strategies described in this article overlap in practice.) Salma’s example of a response to questions about prohibition against eating pork was resolved by affirming the higher overall rationality of God. Indirectly, this resembles David’s solution. It was an

attribution of a potentially dissonant cognition not to an individual shortcoming but to general human intellectual inaptitude. It assumed a metaphysical logic that lies beyond human grasp, rather than attributing the dissonance to a lack of cogent reasons for a dietary prohibition in the religious framework. Similarly, Salma's change of attitude in relation to cycling is an example of a change of source of dissonance from religious doctrine to cultural customs. Unlike in David's case, however, these two strategies of changing the perceived sources of dissonance did not lead to further psychological discomfort.

4.9. Making sacrifices

Dissonance can also be resolved through sacrifices that re-establish a sense of coherence, as in the above case of David self-deprecating and sacrificing a sense of self-worth. Somewhat similarly, earlier in his trajectory, David developed romantic feelings for a woman whom he perceived as 'Mestizo', as 'mixed race'. He struggled for months with the dissonance of his feelings contradicting his racist beliefs, eventually concluding that continuing the relationship meant becoming a 'traitor to his race'. He ultimately chose to sacrifice the relationship to reaffirm cohesion and his identity as a 'truly worthy national-socialist'.

It is worth noting the thematic similarity with Joanna's story, whose deradicalisation was catalysed by a positive encounter with members of an outgroup. David's case shows the opposite: the pressure to resolve dissonance can sometimes lead to a reinforcement of radical commitment, turning a potential exit factor into a catalyst for further radicalisation. In his eyes, this sacrifice brought him closer to the desired moment of being able to tattoo a portrait of Adolf Hitler over his heart. He symbolically reserved this place on his skin, which otherwise is covered by numerous tattoos (including a large portrait of Rudolf Heß on his back), for the time when he would consider himself sufficiently worthy.

4.10. Coexistence, overlap and reinforcement of dissonance

The examples presented above might give the impression that inconsistencies, contradictions, and doubt—or dissonance in general—seldom lead individuals to change their minds. The isolated impact of such experiences on deradicalisation is indeed usually limited, as people frequently resort to the strategies described above to resolve distress without

fundamentally altering their core beliefs. However, all of the individuals whose stories were introduced in this text did disengage or deradicalise, at least partially. Such a change in all instances—except for the unprecedented first story of Joanna—happened under the prolonged influence of numerous accumulating and interacting experiences of dissonance, along with other circumstantial influencing factors. In other words, disengagement and deradicalisation are rarely the result of a single epiphany, but rather a gradual shift in the balance of incentives and distress.

Importantly, the realisation of the impossibility or inability to sustain continuous engagement and the preservation of radical attitudes can take a heavy toll, or even a disastrous turn. David's doubts intensified after realising that one of the core antagonists of his ideology, Marxism, was not what he believed it to be. This sense of dissonance was sustained over time through the influence of Miguel, who consistently challenged his beliefs. His distress increased significantly after he began to conspire to commit a political assassination. Simultaneously, his attempts at discussing such doubts with his 'comrades' were met with disapproval, gradually resulting in social alienation. He felt unwell within the extremist milieu but was unable to imagine himself outside of it; the 'national-socialist' identity was central to David's life and his sense of self. This accumulation of conflicting thoughts and emotions pushed David to the edge.

One evening, lying in a foetal position in a hotel bed, David put a pistol into his mouth. The level of distress became unmanageable, and he saw no solution other than to take his own life. It was his dog that saved him. Seeing David put something in his mouth, the dog assumed it was food and rushed to beg for some. David recalls this grim moment with laughter, noting that the absurdity of the scene made him choke on the gun's barrel. This disruption forced him to consider the uncertain fate of his dog, compelling him to pause. This moment can be interpreted as yet another dissonance, a conflict between the impulse to end his life—an ultimate sacrifice to resolve the torment of numerous challenges to his extremist life, combined with a simultaneous inability to truly distance himself from his beliefs and imagine alternatives—and the desire to care for his dog.

Unable to sleep, he sought comfort that same evening by confessing to strangers on internet chats. One random stranger suggested he put his experiences into words. This constituted the seeds of the idea of telling his story as a means of influencing others—a new

goal that provided a purpose to hang onto. Later, his friend Miguel issued an ultimatum: either seek professional help or end their friendship, which finally forced David to begin therapy.

In such complex cases where many factors play a role, it is especially difficult to determine when a process of disengagement and deradicalisation began, and similarly uncertain when one is effectively deradicalised. David reflects this doubt himself: ‘How to know which of my current thoughts or beliefs are remnants of decades of consumption of neo-Nazi propaganda and which are not? How to know when to trust the contents of my mind?’ Initially, he found many ways of testing himself and pushing his boundaries. For example, when he was immersed in his ideology, he used to wear gloves on public transport to ‘avoid touching the same surfaces as people of other races’, and later he actively sought to touch such surfaces to see how he would feel. He also continues working with his therapist on increasing his tolerance of ambiguity (which, as argued above, is an important factor influencing the propensity for simplistic ideologies). David eventually found purpose first in telling his story and later—in response to the many people contacting him after reading his book—by starting to work toward the prevention of radicalisation in others.

5. Discussion

The experience of psychological discomfort arising from conflicting cognitions—cognitive dissonance—can be an effective catalyst for disengagement and deradicalisation. While established PCVE and CT practices often rely on inducing dissonance to prompt change (for instance, through counter-narratives or intergroup contact), they largely do so without explicit reference to the underlying psychological mechanisms. This article argues that leveraging the explanatory potential of dissonance theory offers a pathway to refine these interventions, moving beyond simply ‘creating doubt’ to actively managing the environmental and cognitive conditions under which that doubt is resolved.

The contrast between the story of Joanna and the other above mentioned participants is instructive. She deradicalised swiftly after a single intense experience, while other radicalised persons entrenched themselves further despite similar doubts. Joanna’s narrative offers more than just a success story; it serves as a blueprint for the ideal intersection of internal conflict and external environment. (Albeit, importantly, her story remains an outlier in the dataset,

suggesting that such a constellation of factors may be rare and difficult to achieve.) Her experience of dissonance—of the positive contact with the outgroup—did not occur in a vacuum, but was potentiated by highly favourable contextual conditions: she was geographically removed from her peers, she was not wearing symbols that would have signalled or enforced her radical identity, and she possessed robust alternative identities and non-antagonising social networks to fall back on. This suggests that, for dissonance to trigger attitudinal change rather than defensive strategies, it should occur within a context where the costs of leaving are minimised and where alternatives to extremism seem viable.

Therefore, this article implies that effective PCVE and CT interventions require a dual focus. Firstly, interventions ought to—and many already do—strive to generate favourable contextual conditions that can facilitate exit. Such a supportive environment ought to reduce the social costs of change and offer alternative identities, thus decreasing the motivation to default to the defensive strategies of dissonance reduction that allow extremist attitudes to be maintained.

Secondly, practitioners can use the typology of responses presented here to identify and inhibit the specific coping mechanisms that allow individuals to evade change. For instance, knowing that a single, isolated occurrence of dissonance is easily ignored or forgotten suggests that interventions should ensure the dissonant experience persists across time and context. Similarly, anticipating that an individual might attempt to shift the source of dissonance (e.g., attributing a contradiction to their own lack of understanding rather than a flaw in the ideology) allows practitioners to prepare follow-up evidence that blocks this specific route of rationalisation. By identifying how individuals adapt their cognitions to restore consistency, practitioners can better disturb these defensive processes and steer the person toward a resolution that necessitates a challenge to their extremist core.

However, deliberate induction of dissonance as part of an intervention can be risky, even fatal. The dangers of inducing dissonance without providing the necessary favourable environment for change are vividly illustrated by David's trajectory. Pushed to the edge of suicide by the accumulation of unresolved dissonance and lacking a safe exit route, David's story serves as a stark warning against hasty or aggressive attempts at 'breaking' a person's worldview. The process of attitudinal change is emotionally turbulent, and without proper consideration of the client's psychological state and the availability of support systems, poorly

designed interventions risk causing severe harm or triggering reactive entrenchment.

The translation of these insights into practice must be approached with necessary caution. The immediate translation of these interview-based insights into concrete, standardised protocols for *in-situ* practice is premature. As noted by one of the anonymous peer-reviewers of this article, practitioners might look for subtle cues such as ‘changes in tone, narrative inconsistency, or emotional withdrawal’ to spot dissonance. Yet, the capacity to interpret such patterns will inevitably depend on numerous variables, including practitioners’ experience and their relationship with the client. The PCVE and CT field is large and diverse, ranging from voluntary counselling to penitentiary or court-mandated settings. In contexts where participation is non-voluntary or trust is fragile, for example, the risk of concealed incompliance—where a client masks their true cognitive state and intentions—is significant. This complicates any attempt to rely on observed behaviours as definitive markers of internal dissonance.

Therefore, the immediate value of this work is primarily in informing practitioner training and critical self-reflection rather than in providing standardised, universal, and ad-hoc protocols for *in-situ* interventions. Practitioners can use these findings to better understand the resilience of radical beliefs and to critically evaluate why certain interventions may fail. The development of reliable, operational tools to identify these specific dissonance-reduction strategies in PCVE and CT practice remains a necessary avenue for future research. Ultimately, this article hopes to motivate a move towards interventions that not only challenge extremist logic but also meticulously construct the conditions under which abandoning that logic becomes a safe choice.

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