



Radicalized Trump Supporters: Construing, Identity Fusion, and Hypothetical and Actual Extremism

Clare B. Mason, David A. Winter, Stefanie Schmeer & Richard C. Bell

To cite this article: Clare B. Mason, David A. Winter, Stefanie Schmeer & Richard C. Bell (16 Sep 2024): Radicalized Trump Supporters: Construing, Identity Fusion, and Hypothetical and Actual Extremism, Journal of Constructivist Psychology, DOI: [10.1080/10720537.2024.2394075](https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2024.2394075)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2024.2394075>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 16 Sep 2024.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 205



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

Radicalized Trump Supporters: Construing, Identity Fusion, and Hypothetical and Actual Extremism

Clare B. Mason^a, David A. Winter^a, Stefanie Schmeer^a and Richard C. Bell^b

^aDepartment of Psychology, Sport and Geography, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK; ^bSchool of Psychological Sciences, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

In May 2021, four months after the fatal insurrection of the “Save America” rally at Capitol Hill, 420 supporters of Donald Trump participated in an online study. Although it was not possible to recruit specifically for those involved, a subsample reported being present and active in the insurrection ($n=38$), with several involved in the storming of the Capitol Building ($n=28$). Individuals’ construing was examined through the repertory grid technique, combined with measures of fusion to the group and willingness to undertake hypothetical extreme pro-group actions. Relatively low cognitive complexity was observed in those actually or hypothetically willing to be involved in the most extreme actions, suggesting that they were the least able to adapt to the world around them. A more positive and meaningful view of the self was developed on becoming a Trump supporter, and fellow Trump supporters were construed more positively than anti-Trump activists. Repertory grid and fusion scores were associated with both actual and hypothetical extreme action. Findings assist in the advancement of understanding why some individuals undertake extreme acts on behalf of a political leader, whilst others do not. With political environments becoming increasingly polarized around the globe, such knowledge is vital.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 December 2022
Accepted 1 August 2024


KEYWORDS

Trump; activist; radicalization; constructivist; repertory grid; identity fusion; extreme pro-group behavior; political violence

Introduction

Donald Trump’s tenure as 45th President of the United States came to an end fourteen days after his supporters’ involvement in fatal events at Capitol Hill, the seat of the United States Congress. Loyal followers breached the Capitol Building, causing damage to property, injuring hundreds, and ultimately, leading to the deaths of nine individuals. These events can be seen in terms of radicalization. As stated by the US National Institute of Justice (2015, p. 1), “violent extremists are those individuals who support or commit ideologically motivated violence to further political, social, or religious goals. Radicalization is the process by which individuals enter into violent extremism.” This was certainly the case at Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021.

CONTACT Clare B. Mason  c.mason7@herts.ac.uk  Department of Psychology, Sport and Geography, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2024.2394075>.

© 2024 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Whilst extremist groups, such as the Proud Boys, were present at the insurrection, the vast majority of those involved were “ordinary” Trump supporters (Palazzolo et al., 2021; Weiner et al., 2021). As Kinsman and Frimer (2021, p. 53) state, Trump supporters range from those who “are more tentative, conditional, and ambivalent [to those who] are more fervent, unconditional and full-throated.” This raises the questions of why some become willing to undertake violent action, whilst others do not.

Numerous psychological models and theories have been developed in attempts to explain the phenomenon. Although an extensive review is beyond the scope of this paper, some of the more prominent include Kruglanski et al.’s (2009) Significance Quest Theory; the Staircase to Terrorism model by Moghaddam (2005); and McCauley and Moskaleiko’s (2017) Two Pyramid model. Whilst none provides a definitive understanding, important issues are highlighted. These have been identified and integrated into the Constructivist Model of Radicalization by Winter and Feixas (2019), which, together with Identity Fusion Theory (Swann et al., 2009, 2012), underpins this study.

Personal construct psychology

Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) (Kelly, 1955/1991) is one of the grand theories of psychology, striving to provide an explanatory framework underlying all human behavior. At its heart is the fundamental postulate: “A person’s processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which [they] anticipate events” (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 47). Kelly saw people as “scientists” (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 4), continually devising hypotheses about the world they encounter. Constructs are the basis for these anticipations. They are bipolar in nature and highly individual (seeing something as “good” can be in comparison to “bad” or, for example, to “dull” depending on the situation and the individual). Additionally, culturally shared constructs can be held, contributing to an individual’s cultural identity. Constructs are organized in a hierarchical construct system, the most superordinate including core constructs, those concerned with fundamental values and identity.

When an individual encounters an experience that is inconsistent with, thereby invalidating, their construing, the optimal response is to reconstrue. This is an essential part of learning and of life. However, difficulties may arise, particularly when the invalidation involves core constructs, or if the individual’s construct system is relatively undifferentiated (less cognitively complex).

Robust PCP methodology (Caputi et al., 2012) includes the repertory grid, which provides both quantitative and qualitative data and can access construing at a low level of awareness. The value of this has been demonstrated in previous studies of people with extreme views [e.g., (de-)radicalized Salafist Muslims in Tunisia (Winter & Muhanna-Matar, 2020); Islamist terrorists in India (Canter et al., 2014); and the right-wing terrorist Anders Brevik (Winter & Tschudi, 2015)]. These studies contributed to the development of the Constructivist Model of Radicalization (Winter & Feixas, 2019).

The constructivist model of radicalization

Common aspects of prevailing models and theories of radicalization were identified by Winter and Feixas (2019) in the development of the constructivist model. These include perceived deprivation (e.g., Moghaddam, 2005); positive comparison to a

demonized out-group (e.g., McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2017); a quest for personal significance (Kruglanski et al., 2009); and increased identification, “fusion,” with a radical group resulting in an increased willingness to undertake personally costly acts on behalf of the group (Swann et al., 2009, 2012).

The constructivist model describes the pathway of radicalization in several stages.

1. *The radicalized individual has a history of invalidation of his/her construing, particularly in regard to core aspects of self-construing* (Winter & Feixas, 2019, p. 3).

A state of uncertainty is widely recognized as linked to radicalization (e.g., Hogg et al., 2013). In PCP terms, uncertainty, and consequent anxiety, arise from invalidation of an individual’s construing. This could result from challenging events within close personal relationships, or broader social experiences, such as prejudice, leading the individual to question the validity of their current core constructs.

2. *This sometimes involves one or more episodes that lead to massive invalidation, and act as “transformative triggers”* (Winter & Feixas, 2019, p. 3).

Massive invalidation of the construct system can occur when several superordinate structures (involving core constructs) become invalidated within a short period of time. This leaves a system unable to deliver its primary role. Without this, an individual is unable to construe, or understand, the world. Extreme uncertainty results and is experienced as intense anxiety.

3. *The individual with a very undifferentiated (and thus inflexible) construct system may be particularly vulnerable to such invalidation and consequent structural collapse* (Winter & Feixas, 2019, p. 4).

Individuals with undifferentiated construct systems (and subsequent low cognitive complexity) have a restricted view of events. When an invalidation occurs, their construct system cannot easily provide an alternative understanding. If the individual is unable to reconstrue, the construct system may collapse and be unable to anticipate and predict events. The resulting uncertainty may be experienced as chaos.

4. *His/her radical beliefs, usually drawing upon available social constructions, allow the development of a “turning point” in his or her sense of identity with a more structured and certain view of the world* (Winter & Feixas, 2019, p. 4).

Facing invalidation and uncertainty, an individual may try to make sense of the world by engaging in cycles of construing and reconstruing in the search for alternative understanding. A new ideological framework can redress uncertainty by providing a sure structure. Radical doctrine lends itself to absolute certainty and a new understanding of the world. The individual may develop a new core role (identity) through membership of the ideological group they have turned to.

5. *The development of an extreme negative construction of another group, which may be perceived as responsible for the individual’s invalidations, allows further definition of the self by contrast with this group* (Winter & Feixas, 2019, p. 4).

The individual’s new, more certain way of seeing the world likely involves extreme negative construing of another (out-)group. This would assist in the development of a positive identity for the individual, as outlined in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

6. *The individual's radical constructions are validated by contact with others who share similar views, often coupled with constriction of the previous social world to avoid further invalidation* (Winter & Feixas, 2019, p. 5).

Individuals in the process of radicalization often reduce their social contacts to include only those of the same beliefs. Their construct system is thus assured, avoiding any invalidation. This can be achieved through the individual's membership of an ideological group. Group membership has many benefits and can develop into a "unique state of oneness with a group" (Swann et al., 2009, p. 1000).

7. *The likelihood of acting upon radical beliefs, including violent actions, is greater in those individuals in whom beliefs in these actions provide the greatest increment in structure to his/her view of the self* (Winter & Feixas, 2019, p. 5).

For some, extreme actions on behalf of the radical group may provide even greater certainty and structure to their construct system. For example, taking the identity of religious martyr might provide consistency with their new core role.

8. *Reconstruing of violence as acceptable may be necessary if the person is to engage in such acts without guilt (and indeed experience guilt for not engaging in them)* (Winter & Feixas, 2019, p. 5).

Violent actions will be associated with guilt for those whose self-construal is of a peaceful person. However, where violence is required as part of the core role, it can become a legitimate facet of self-construal, being seen as essential to the group, the individual's role within it, and the maintenance of the individual's core constructs. Not undertaking activities essential to the group, such as violent acts, would then result in feelings of guilt.

9. *His/her radicalized view of the world may be shored up by "hostility," in Kelly's (1955/1991) sense of extorting evidence for the individual's constructions* (Winter & Feixas, 2019, p. 5).

The certainty provided to the individual by the radicalized construct system must be maintained in the face of invalidations from others. Kelly (1955/1991) suggests that hostility occurs when an individual is unable to revise or elaborate their construct system to understand new events. Instead, they force the evidence to fit their predictions. In this way, radicalized and extremist views are maintained despite invalidations from others, that is, the majority of society.

10. *Similar processes may operate in members of the "other" group, creating a vicious cycle of extreme construing based on mutual validation of extreme negative views of the other* (Winter & Feixas, 2019, p. 5).

Opposing groups may act in similarly hostile ways, both making evidence fit their extreme, negative perception of the other. Resulting actions can validate constructions, provoking retaliatory acts, thus validating negative perceptions, and so on.

It is possible for an individual to be at any point along the radicalization pathway. It is also possible to become radicalized without progressing through all stages. However, the latter stages explain how an individual may progress from radical ideology to radical action.

Identity fusion theory

Developed by Swann et al. (2009, 2012), Identity Fusion Theory suggests that whilst the majority of people draw a clear distinction between their personal (individual) and social (group) identities, for some the self-group identity barrier is blurred and porous, and the individual becomes “fused” to the group. This visceral “oneness” with the group generates exceptional investment in the group and significantly higher levels of extreme pro-group behavior. This includes willingness to fight and self-sacrifice (Gómez, Brooks, et al., 2011; Gómez, Morales, et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014) and altruistic acts (e.g., Buhrmester et al., 2015).

Identity fusion is seen in familial relations (e.g., Vázquez et al., 2019) but is also observed in collective groups where the individual is unacquainted with the majority of the members. This includes political movements, where fused individuals recognize others sharing their core constructs and values, making them appear “family-like,” and potentially, worth dying for (Kunst et al., 2019; Swann et al., 2014).

Identity Fusion Theory has well-established methodologies for measuring degree of fusion and associated pro-group behavior. Numerous studies have been undertaken across five continents with a wide range of participants, from soccer supporters (e.g., Newson et al., 2016) to frontline revolutionaries (Whitehouse et al., 2014). Kunst et al. (2019) undertook particularly relevant work in their study of the fusion of political leaders, focusing on Donald Trump. In their systematic review of putative risk and protective factors for radicalization, Wolfowicz et al. (2021) found identity fusion was the strongest predictor of radical intentions among many alternative variables. Furthermore, a recent meta-analysis by Varmann et al. (2023) demonstrated that identity fusion is indeed strongly associated with extreme pro-group actions, and to a greater extent than social identification.

However, although identity fusion has been shown to be a powerful predictor of extreme pro-group behavior and benefits from robust and well-validated measures, it is not the sole predictor (Gómez et al., 2020). The constructivist model complements the concept of identity fusion with its capacity to explain psychological processes at a more idiographic level. Like identity fusion, it has rigorous and well-established methodology which has provided valuable data in the study of radicalization. This methodology has additional merit in having low demand characteristics, permitting access to construing at a lower level of awareness than is possible with other measures, including those of identity fusion. The study thus combined one of the strongest predictors of extreme pro-group behavior with an idiographic examination of the more fundamental psychological processes involved, using well-established methodology previously used in studies of radicalization and political activists.

The present study

Even when out of Office, Donald Trump is a deeply polarizing figure, continuing to agitate his supporters. The breach of the Capitol Building in 2021 exposed the extremism of Trump support, and indeed of the former President himself in his encouragement of these actions (e.g., Barry & Frenkel, 2021). Such extremist views and actions are not, of course, unique to the United States, and indeed investigating and understanding them is particularly important in what may seem to be an increasingly

polarized world. To this end, four months after the January 6 insurrection, methodologies from personal construct psychology and identity fusion theory were employed in an investigation of Trump supporters.

Hypotheses

The study aimed to contribute to this understanding by testing the following hypotheses derived from the Constructivist Model of Radicalization, identity fusion literature, and previous research in these areas.

1. Trump supporters will show the following characteristics:
 - a. more positive construing of the *self after* becoming a Trump supporter than of the *self before* this;
 - b. greater salience (meaningfulness) of construing of the *self after* compared to the *self before* becoming a Trump supporter;
 - c. more positive construing of fellow than of opposition activists;
 - d. a relatively high level of identity fusion.
2. Levels of previous (actual) action undertaken in support of Trump will be higher in those who:
 - a. have less differentiated construct systems;
 - b. have the greatest increment in positivity of self-construing after becoming a Trump supporter;
 - c. have the greatest increase in salience of self-construing since becoming a Trump supporter;
 - d. show the most positive construing of fellow, in contrast to opposition, activists;
 - e. show higher levels of identity fusion.
3. Willingness to undertake extreme hypothetical pro-group actions in support of Trump will be higher in those who:
 - a. have less differentiated construct systems;
 - b. have the greatest increment in positivity of self-construing after becoming a Trump supporter;
 - c. have the greatest increase in salience of self-construing since becoming a Trump supporter;
 - d. show the most positive construing of fellow, in contrast to opposition, activists;
 - e. show higher levels of identity fusion.
 - f. report high levels of previous action in support of Trump.

Methods

Participants

Four hundred twenty participants were recruited to an online study *via* the Qualtrics platform fee-based service, which provided access to a pool of potential participants based on the specific demographics of Trump supporters resident in the United States.

The sample consisted of 210 females, 209 males, and one who preferred not to say. Age ranged from 19 to 93 years, with a mean of 57.7 years ($SD=16.6$). Whilst it was not possible to recruit specifically those who actively demonstrated in support of Trump, this was included as a survey item. Sixteen percent had done so. Notably, 9% ($n=36$) had been present at the “Save America” rally at Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, and 7% ($n=28$) had been actively involved in the breach of the Capitol Building. Reflecting images of Trump demonstrations, 95% ($n=399$) of the study sample were of white ethnicity. Demographic characteristics were found to vary according to the level of action participants had previously undertaken in support of Trump (manuscript in preparation).

The study took place in May 2021, four months after the “Save America” rally at Capitol Hill.

Materials

Construing

Repertory grid. To examine their individual construct systems, participants were presented with a repertory grid (Kelly, 1955/1991), adapted by Winter (2011) for the study of radicalization (Figure 1). Participants rated a supplied set of 12 elements (including the self and fellow Trump supporters) against 12 bi-polar constructs, using a scale ranging from 1 to 7. The constructs were developed in a previous study of political activism (Mason et al., 2021) (See Appendix A and Figure A1 for details of online grid administration).

Identity fusion

The verbal measure of identity fusion (Gómez, Brooks, et al., 2011) was used to assess participants’ fusion to the Trump supporter community. This involved seven items regarding the relationship with fellow supporters with responses ranging from 1 to 7, strongly agree to strongly disagree. Examples include “I am one with other Trump supporters” and “I am strong because of the community supporting Donald Trump” (see Appendix A).

Self before supporting Trump	Self since supporting Trump	Ideal self	Fellow Trump supporter	Fellow Trump supporter	Fellow Trump supporter	Anti-Trump Activist	Anti-Trump Activist	Anti-Trump Activist	Neutral individual	Please complete with a rating of 1 – 7	
										1	7
										Politically engaged	Not politically engaged
										Activist	Less outspoken
										Democratic	Un-democratic
										Compassionate	Lacking compassion
										Informed	Ill informed
										Intelligent	Not intelligent
										Having integrity	Not having integrity
										Kind	Unkind
										Likeable	Unlikeable
										Stressed	Not stressed
										Happy	Unhappy
										Like me	Unlike me

Figure 1. Repertory grid (see Appendix and Figure A1 for online adaptation).

Willingness to undertake extreme acts on behalf of the group

Three measures were provided to explore participants' hypothetical willingness to undertake extreme acts on behalf of the Trump community:

Measure of willingness to fight and die for the group (Swann et al., 2009). Participants responded to a set of seven questions regarding their willingness to fight and die for the group, using a scale ranging from 1 to 5, *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Examples include: "I would fight someone who was physically threatening another Trump supporter" and "I would sacrifice my life if it saved another Trump supporter's life" (see Appendix A).

Trolley dilemma. Two adaptations of the trolley dilemma (Foot, 1967; Swann et al., 2010) were presented together with graphical representations.

1. Self-sacrifice to save five in-group members: Participants could choose to (a) do nothing and let a runaway trolley kill 5 fellow Trump supporters, or (b) sacrifice their life by jumping onto the track of the trolley to save the five Trump supporters.
2. Self-sacrifice to save five out-group members or one in-group member: Participants could choose to (a) do nothing, (b) sacrifice their life by jumping onto the track to divert the trolley to save five anti-Trump activists (resulting in the death of one fellow Trump supporter), or (c) sacrifice their life by jumping onto the track to divert the trolley to save one Trump supporter (resulting in the death of five anti-Trump activists).

Questions regarding political violence (adapted from Ginges & Atran, 2011). Participants were asked to respond with "I would do"; "I might do"; or "I would never do":

Would you engage in political violence (including damage to property and persons) if the community supporting Donald Trump was forcibly dismantled?

Would you engage in political violence (including damage to property and persons) if it would result in Donald Trump achieving his goals?

Results

General analytical approach

The following measures were derived from analyses using the software programs IDIOGRID (Grice, 2002a, 2002b) and GRIDSTAT (Bell, 2009):

1. *Degree of Construct System Differentiation (Cognitive Complexity)*. Construct percentage variance factor analysis (CPVAF) provides an indication of the degree of differentiation of an individual's construct system. Lower CPVAF¹ values indicate a less differentiated construct system, one which has a lower level of cognitive complexity and therefore is arguably less open to reconstruction in response to new ideas and experiences.
2. *Distance from Ideal Self*². A high score on a measure of an element's distance from the ideal self indicates a construed dissimilarity, that is, a more negative construing of that particular element. It provides an indication of the relative

positive/negative construing of the self before and after becoming an activist (an indication of self-esteem); and of fellow and opposition activists.

3. *Element Salience*. Measured by percentage sum of squares of the ratings provided in the repertory grid, higher scores indicate that the element concerned is construed more extremely and likely to hold more meaning for the individual.

In repertory grid analyses, the calculation of many measures depends on within-construct variation. In this data set, a lack of variation was observed in several cases. Fifty-four grids were excluded where there were less than six varying constructs and six varying elements.

None of the study data were normally distributed (Shapiro-Wilks significance value $<.001$). This is perhaps unsurprising, given the distinctive nature of the sample. Parametric tests with bootstrapping (1,000 replicates) were therefore used throughout.³

Measures of construing

Degree of construct system differentiation (cognitive complexity)

General characteristics of Trump supporters. Lower CPVAF1 values indicate a relatively undifferentiated construct system (and lower cognitive complexity) compared to others in a population. The mean CPVAF1 value for the study population was $M=59.71$, $SD=17.46$.

Previous action. CPVAF1 values decreased with increasing level of previous action, with lowest values observed in those who “Breached the Capitol Building.” A one-way between-groups Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) indicated this was a significant effect (Table 1, Figure 2). *Post-hoc* analyses ($p < 0.001$, Tukey’s HSD) indicated that the mean CPVAF1 value for “Breached the Capitol Building” was significantly smaller compared to “Had not demonstrated”; and compared to “Had demonstrated but were not present at Capitol Hill.” This suggests that the less differentiated, and less cognitively complex, an individual’s construct system was (and arguably less open to reconstruction), the more extreme their self-reported actions in support of Trump.

Prospective action.

Willingness to fight and die for the group. Cognitive complexity was observed to decrease as willingness to fight and die increased. Linear regression analysis showed that CPVAF1 value explained ~4% of the variance in willingness to fight and die for the group score (Table 2).

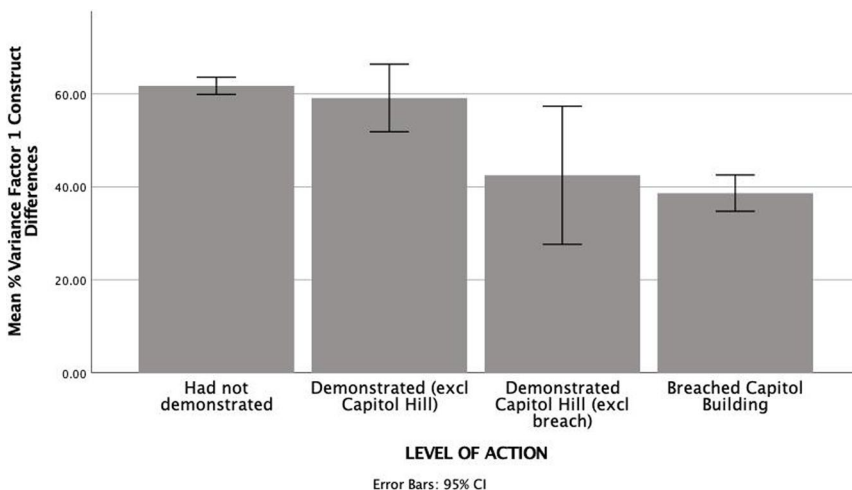
This suggests that those who were more likely to be willing to fight and die for the group were also more likely to have lower cognitive complexity.

Trolley dilemma. In scenario (a) self-sacrifice to save 5 fellow Trump supporters, an independent samples *t*-test indicated a significantly lower CPVAF1 value for those who would hypothetically self-sacrifice to save five fellow Trump supporters compared to those who would do nothing (Table 3). This suggests that those who would save five fellow Trump supporters have a less differentiated construct system (lower cognitive complexity). However, a one-way between groups ANOVA indicated that there were no significant differences in CPVAF1 values according to choice of response to trolley dilemma (b), concerning self-sacrifice to save one fellow or five opposition supporters (Table 3).

Table 1. Level of previous action in support of Trump and test measures: means, standard deviations and one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA).

Measure	Had not demonstrated		Had demonstrated but not present at Capitol Hill		Present at Capitol Hill but did not breach Capitol Building		Breached Capitol Building		F (3, 366)	p	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Identity fusion	4.58	1.36	5.67	1.02	6.31	.84	6.05	.85	20.54*	<.001	.13
Willingness to fight and die for group	14.83	6.05	18.17	6.86	25.30	6.62	28.61	5.61	53.03*	<.001	.23
CPVAF1	59.75	16.63	57.12	17.62	40.50	19.33	36.66	8.80	16.95	<.001	.12
Difference self before-self after: distance from ideal self	.27	.54	.19	.52	.04	.48	.37	.79	.92	>.05	
Self before distance from ideal self	1.77	.63	1.69	.60	1.69	.59	2.54	.71	10.51	<.001	.08
Self after distance from ideal self	1.50	.62	1.50	.77	1.92	.83	2.16	.45	8.79	<.001	.07
Difference fellow-opposition supporter: distance from ideal self	.97	.87	1.33	.94	.58	.71	.27	.49	.69	<.001	.05

*Degrees of freedom for these analyses: between groups = 3, within groups = 416.

**Figure 2.** Mean construct percentage variance factor values by level of action previously undertaken in support of Trump.

Political violence. A one-way between-groups ANOVA indicated a significant effect on CPVAF1 values of willingness to undertake hypothetical political violence both (a) to prevent the Trump support group being dismantled and (b) to achieve Trump's aims (Table 4). *Post-hoc* analyses (<.001 Tukey HSD) showed that those who indicated that they "would" or "might" undertake hypothetical political violence had significantly lower CPVAF1 values, suggesting lower cognitive complexity than those who "would never."

Table 2. Predictor of scores on the measure of willingness to fight and die for the group: simple and multiple linear regression analyses.

Predictor variable	95% CI for B			ANOVA			Regression equation			
	B	LL	UL	SE B	β	R ²		ΔR^2	F(1,364)	p
Simple linear regression										
Identity fusion	.37	.31	.43	.31	.50	.50	.25	138.18*	<.001	WFD = 3.94+(.37 fusion score)
CPVAF1	-0.09	-0.13	-0.04	.02	-0.21	.04	.04	16.33	<.001	WFD = 21.05 + (-0.09 CPVAF1)
Distance from ideal self: <i>Self before</i>	2.26	1.17	3.35	.56	.21	.04	.04	16.58	<.001	WFD = 12.05 + (2.26 Dist <i>Self-before</i> to ideal self)
Distance from ideal self: <i>Self after</i>	1.91	.78	3.03	.57	.17	.03	.03	11.08	<.001	WFD = 13.19 + (1.91 Dist <i>Self-after</i> to ideal self)
Multiple linear regression										
Identity fusion	.35	.28	.54	.03	.47	.28	.28	35.86**	<.001	WFD = 5.14+ (.35 fusion score) + (-0.05 CPVAF1) + (1.39 Dist <i>Self-before</i> to ideal self)
CPVAF1	-0.05	-0.09	-0.01	.02	-0.13					All variables were significant predictors ($p < .01$) other than distance from ideal self to <i>Self after</i> ($p > .05$).
Distance from ideal self: <i>Self before</i>	1.41	.16	2.66	.64	.13					
Distance from ideal self: <i>Self after</i>	-0.04	-1.35	1.28	.67	-0.01					

CI: confidence interval; LL: lower limit; UL: upper limit; WFD: measure of willingness to fight and die for the group.

*Degrees of freedom for fusion analysis: between groups = 1, within groups = 418.

**Degrees of freedom for multiple linear regression: between groups = 3, within groups = 362.

Table 3. Trolley dilemma scenarios (a) and (b): means, standard deviations and independent t-tests/one-way between-groups ANOVA.

Measure	Do nothing			Save 5 fellow supporters			Do nothing			Save 5 opposition Trump supporters would die			Save 1 Trump supporter (five opposition supporters would die)			F (3, 366)	p	η^2
	M	SD	t(364)	M	SD	t(364)	M	SD	p	M	SD	p	M	SD	p			
Identity fusion	31.40	9.67	8.79	37.04	8.79	6.02*	31.06	9.41	<.001	34.66	7.82	<.001	34.06	9.41	25.74**	<.001	.13	
CPVAF1	61.61	16.47	18.53	56.86	18.53	2.57	59.05	15.96	<.05	56.38	18.41	<.05	55.50	20.04	1.46	>.05		
Difference self before-self after: distance from ideal self	.26	.52	.60	.27	.60	.08	.27	.54	>.05	.25	.57	>.05	.25	.56	1.08	>.05		
Self before distance from ideal self	1.77	.65	.68	1.87	.68	1.41	1.77	.63	>.05	1.90	.68	>.05	1.84	.68	1.16	>.05		
Self after distance from ideal self	1.51	.67	.62	1.61	.62	1.38	1.50	.64	>.05	1.65	.68	>.05	1.59	.57	1.75	>.05		
Difference self before-self after: salience	.06	.37	.35	.05	.35	.44	.07	.38	>.05	.07	.33	>.05	.01	.34	.85	>.05		
Difference fellow-opposition supporter: distance from ideal self	.96	.89	.85	.92	.85	.40	.95	.95	>.05	.87	.83	>.05	1.02	.84	.60	>.05		

*Degrees of freedom for fusion t-test analysis = 418.

**Degrees of freedom for fusion ANOVA analysis: between groups = 3, within groups = 415.

Table 4. Political violence scenarios (a) and (b): means, standard deviations and one-way between-groups ANOVA.

Scenario (a) to save the Trump support group from being dismantled									
	I would never		I might		I would		F (3, 366)	p	η ²
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Identity fusion	32.14	9.65	37.50	7.51	42.30	7.11	23.03*	<.001	.01
CPVAF1	61.74	(16.24)	52.56	(20.91)	48.82	(18.06)	11.47	<.001	.06
Difference <i>self before-self after:</i>	.26	.54	.26	.42	.24	.83	.03	>.05	
Distance from ideal self									
<i>Self before</i> distance from ideal self	1.76	.63	1.99	.71	2.14	.83	5.87	<.01	.03
<i>Self after</i> distance from ideal self	1.50	.64	1.72	.56	1.90	.75	6.83	<.001	.03
Difference fellow-opposition supporter: Distance from ideal self	1.01	.86	.71	.95	.63	.78	4.10	<.05	.06

Scenario (b) to achieve Trump's aims									
	I would never		I might		I would		F(3, 366)	p	η ²
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Identity fusion	32.12	9.56	38.52	6.99	43.19	6.69	27.65*	<.001	.12
CPVAF1	61.96	16.43	48.96	18.18	47.20	18.37	17.03	<.001	.09
Difference <i>self before-self after:</i>	.27	.34	.19	.50	.28	.77	.28	>.05	
Distance from ideal self									
<i>Self before</i> distance from ideal self	1.75	.62	2.06	.66	2.19	.91	8.07	<.001	.04
<i>Self after</i> distance from ideal self	1.49	.62	1.87	.62	1.91	.73	10.13	<.001	.05
Difference fellow-opposition supporter: Distance from ideal self	1.01	.87	.60	.81	.60	.86	5.55	<.05	.03

*Degrees of freedom for fusion analysis: between groups = 3, within groups = 415.

Element construing relative to ideal self: the self before and after becoming a Trump supporter

General characteristics of Trump supporters. Compared to the *self before*, on becoming a Trump supporter participants construed themselves significantly more positively (in terms of distance from the ideal self, where smaller distances indicate more positive construing and higher self-esteem) (Table 5).

Previous action. This finding of increased self-esteem was found to be significant for all action levels other than those who were “Present at Capitol Hill but did not breach the Capitol Building” (Table 5, Figure 3).

It is interesting to note that before activism, those involved in the breach of the Capitol Building displayed the greatest distance from the ideal self, suggesting the lowest self-esteem. This was indicated by a significant one-way between-subjects ANOVA (Table 5, Figure 4). *Post-hoc* tests ($p < .001$, Tukey’s HSD) indicated that significantly larger distances from the ideal self to the *self before* becoming a Trump supporter were observed in two pairings: “Breached Capitol Building” compared to

Table 5. Construing of self, fellow and opposition supporters by study population and by level of previous action in support of Trump: means, standard deviations and paired *t*-tests.

	Distance from ideal self						Saliency						Distance from ideal self					
	Self before		Self after		<i>t</i> (364)	<i>p</i>	Self before		Self after		<i>t</i> (364)	<i>p</i>	Fellow supporter		Opposition supporter		<i>t</i> (364)	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Study Population	1.81	.66	1.55	.65	9.07	<.001	1.96	.50	2.01	.52	4.16	<.001	1.74	.62	2.68	.59	20.62	<.001
Had not demonstrated	1.77	.63	1.50	.62	8.73	<.001	1.95	.49	2.00	.52	2.50	<.01	1.70	.62	2.70	.60	19.63	<.001
Had demonstrated but not present at Capitol Hill	1.69	.60	1.50	.77	1.83	<.05	2.08	.54	2.06	.52	.60	>.05	1.42	.64	2.75	.49	.94	<.001
Present at Capitol Hill but did not breach Capitol Building	1.69	.59	1.92	.83	.26	>.05	1.89	.49	2.01	.60	1.34	>.05	1.89	.49	2.47	.38	2.45	<.05
Breached Capitol Building	2.54	.71	2.16	.45	2.23	<.05	1.90	.50	2.06	.45	2.26	<.05	2.07	.43	2.34	.36	.05	<.05

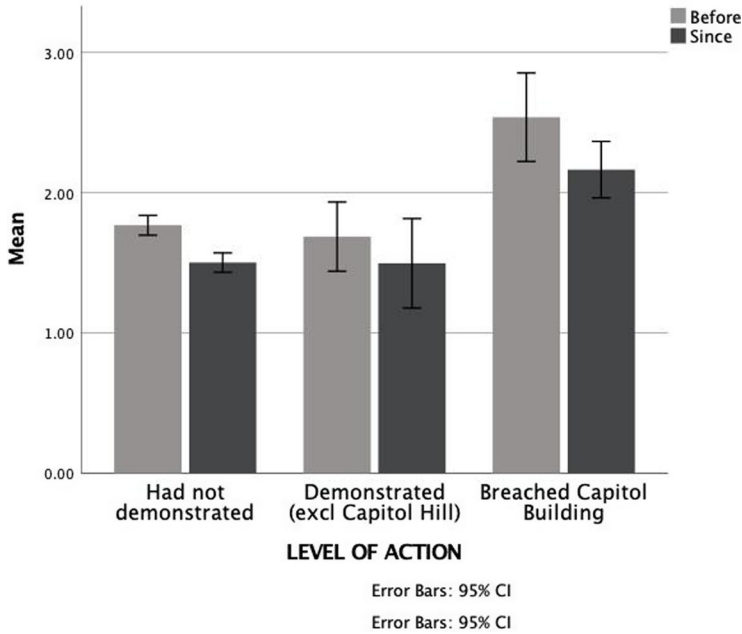


Figure 3. Distance from ideal self to self before and self after becoming a Trump supporter by level of previous action.

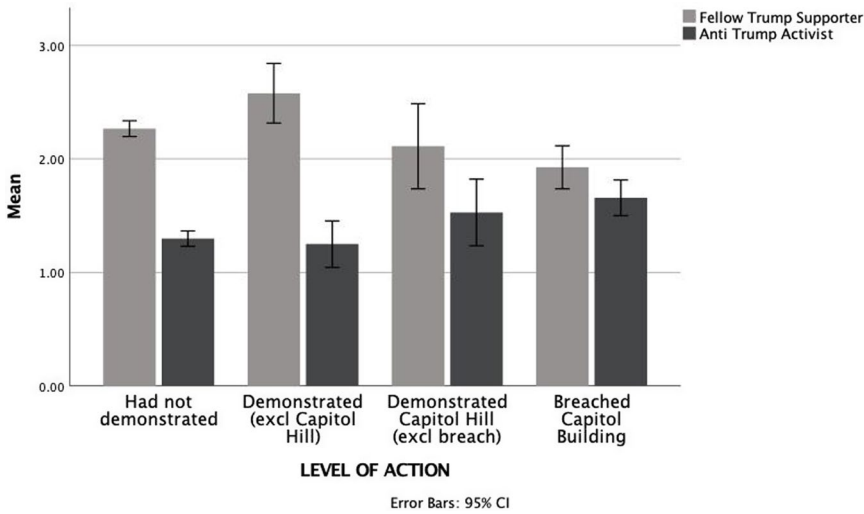


Figure 4. Mean distance from ideal self to fellow and opposition supporters by level of previous action.

“Had not demonstrated” and “Breached Capitol Building” compared to “Had demonstrated, but not at Capitol Hill.”

Similar significant differences were observed between levels of action in the *self after* becoming a Trump supporter, indicated by a significant one-way between-subjects ANOVA (Table 5). Again, *post-hoc* tests ($p < .001$, Tukey’s HSD) indicated significantly larger distances of the *self after* supporting Trump to the ideal self in the same

pairings, i.e., “Breached Capitol Building” compared to those who “Had not demonstrated” and “Breached Capitol Building” compared to those who “Had demonstrated, but not at Capitol Hill.” This suggests that participants who had been involved in the breach of the Capitol Building were those with the lowest self-esteem, both before and after supporting Trump.

Prospective action.

Willingness to fight and die for the group. The difference between distances from the ideal self to the *self before* and *self after* supporting Trump was not found to increase with increasing willingness to fight and die for the group. This suggests that, contrary to expectations, willingness to fight did not appear to be higher in those with the greater increase in positivity of self-construing. However, further interrogation of the data, employing linear regression analysis, indicated that distance from ideal self of the *self before* explained ~4% of the variance in willingness to fight and die for the group (Table 2). A similar relationship was found between willingness to fight and die score and distance from ideal self of the *self after*, with linear regression analysis indicating that this distance explained ~3% of variance in willingness to fight and die for the group score (Table 2). These results suggest that willingness to undertake hypothetical extreme acts increased somewhat with decreasing self-esteem (indicated by greater distance from the ideal self) both before and after becoming a Trump supporter.

Trolley dilemma. There were no significant findings regarding the *difference* in distance of the *self before* and *self after* becoming a Trump supporter relative to the ideal self, dependent on trolley dilemma outcomes in either scenario (a) or (b). Similarly, there were no significant findings regarding the distances from the ideal self of the *self before* or *self after* (Table 3).

Political violence. The difference in distance relative to the ideal self of the *self before* and *self after* becoming a Trump supporter did not vary significantly according to willingness to undertake political violence (one-way between-groups ANOVA). That is, there was no evidence to support the hypothesis that the greatest willingness to take action in support of Trump would be observed in those for whom the greatest enhancement in self-construing was experienced (Table 4). However, further interrogation of the data indicated that distance from the ideal self of the *self after* becoming a Trump supporter was greater (lower self-esteem) for those displaying increased willingness to undertake political violence, both (a) to save the Trump support group and (b) to achieve Trump’s aims (one-way between-groups ANOVA) (Table 4). In contrast, whilst the distance from the ideal self of the *self before* becoming a Trump supporter was greater in those more willing to undertake political violence to save the group, it was less in those more willing to undertake political violence to achieve Trump’s aims, according to one-way ANOVA (Table 4). In other words, after becoming a Trump supporter, those with lower self-esteem were more likely than others to be willing to act on behalf of Trump, whilst those whose self-esteem was lower than other participants beforehand were more likely to be willing to act to save the Trump support group. This contrasts with those whose self-esteem was higher than others beforehand, who were more likely to be willing to act to achieve Trump’s aims.

Salience of the self

General characteristics of Trump supporters. As higher scores in the salience measure indicate that an element holds more meaning, it would appear that across the study population the *self after* becoming a Trump supporter was more meaningful to the individual than the *self before*, as indicated by the significantly higher *self after* than *self before* score (Table 5).

Previous action. The increase in the salience of the *self after* compared to the *self before* becoming a Trump supporter was significant for those who had not demonstrated and those who had breached the Capitol Building. It was not found to be significant in other subgroups of previous action (Table 5).

Prospective action. Political violence. Significantly higher salience scores indicated that the *self after* supporting Trump was more meaningful than the *self before* supporting Trump for those who “would never” or “might” undertake political violence to save the Trump support group from being dismantled and to achieve Trump’s aims (Table 6).

There were no other significant findings of variation of salience with prospective measures of extreme behavior.

Element construing relative to ideal self: fellow Trump supporters and anti-Trump activists

General characteristics of Trump supporters. Compared to opposition activists, fellow supporters were construed significantly more positively (Table 5).

Previous action. Paired sample *t*-tests suggested that anti-Trump activists were construed more negatively (at a greater distance from the ideal self) than fellow supporters at all levels of action (Table 5, Figure 4).

Significant differences were also observed in the *difference* in distance of the ideal self from fellow Trump supporters and the ideal self from anti-Trump supporters, according to the level of previous action (one-way between-subjects ANOVA, Table 1). *Post-hoc* tests ($p < .001$, Tukey’s HSD) indicated that the difference was significantly smaller for those who “Breached the Capitol Building” compared to those who “Had demonstrated but not at Capitol Hill” and those who “Had not demonstrated.” To summarize, anti-Trump activists were construed more negatively than fellow supporters; the difference from ideal self was significantly smaller for those who breached the Capitol Building.

Table 6. Salience of self after compared to self before supporting Trump, hypothetical willingness to undertake political violence scenarios (a) and (b): means, standard deviations and paired *t*-tests.

	Scenario (a) To save the Trump support group from being dismantled						Scenario (b) To achieve Trump’s aims					
	<i>Self before</i>		<i>Self after</i>		<i>t</i> (364)	<i>p</i>	<i>Self before</i>		<i>Self after</i>		<i>t</i> (364)	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Would never do	1.97	.49	2.02	.52	2.36	<.05	1.97	.49	2.02	.52	2.50	<.05
Might do	1.91	.52	2.10	.53	2.06	<.05	1.87	.55	1.99	.54	1.88	>.05
Would do	1.92	.53	1.97	.51	.90	>.05	1.89	.51	1.92	.50	.69	>.05

Prospective action. No significant Pearson's correlations were observed between the measure of willingness to fight and die for the group and the distance from the ideal self of fellow supporters; opposition supporters; or the difference between these two distances.

Trolley dilemma. According to independent *t*-tests and one-way ANOVA analyses that examined the differences according to trolley dilemma response, no significant differences were found between trolley dilemma outcomes in terms of the *difference* in construing of fellow and opposition supporters, in relation to distance from the ideal self (Tables 3).

Political violence. Significant one-way between-subjects ANOVA results were obtained for the difference in distance from the ideal self of fellow and of opposition supporters for both questions regarding political violence. However, only one significant pairwise comparison ($p < .05$ Tukey's HSD) was found. This indicated that to achieve Trump's aims, compared to fellow supporters, those who "would never" participate in political violence construed opposition activists more negatively than those who "might" participate (Table 4).

Identity fusion

General characteristics of Trump supporters. Total scores across the seven identity fusion items ranged from 7 (minimum possible, highly independent) to 49 (maximum possible, highly fused). The distribution is shown in Figure 5. It can be seen that most respondents reported a substantial level of fusion.

Previous action. Mean fusion scores significantly differed by level of previous action, as indicated by a one-way between-subjects ANOVA (Table 1). *Post-hoc* tests indicated that the mean fusion score for those who "Had not demonstrated" was significantly lower

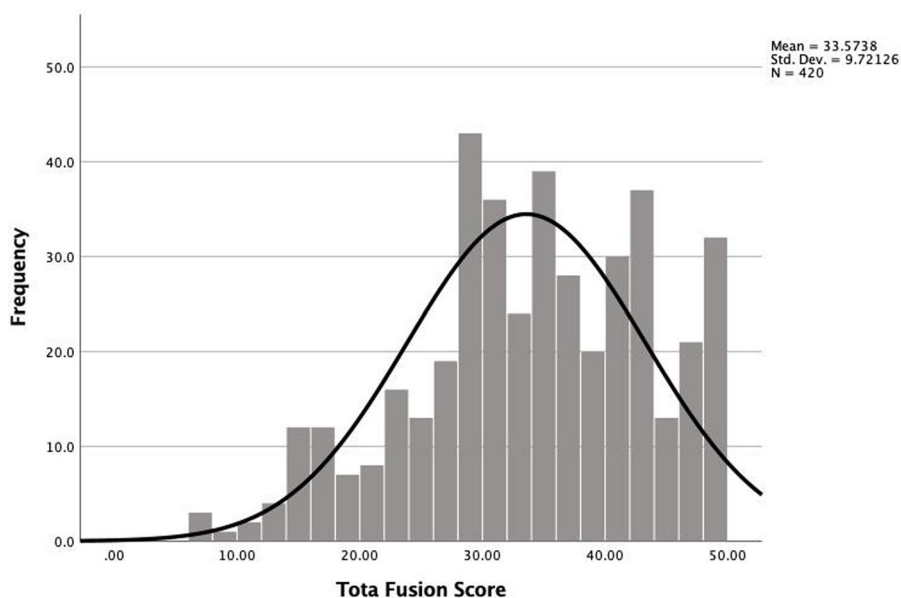


Figure 5. Distribution of fusion scores across the study population.

($p < 0.001$, Tukey's HSD) compared to those who "Had demonstrated (excluding Capitol Hill, January 6, 2021)," were "Present at Capitol Hill, January 6, 2021 (but not involved in breach)" and "Breached the Capitol Building, January 6, 2021." In summary, participants previously involved in group action were significantly more fused to the group than those who were not (Figure 6).

Prospective action.

Willingness to fight and die for the group. Indicated by significant regression analysis (Table 2), scores on the willingness to fight and die for the group scale increased with increasing scores on the fusion measure, with fusion score accounting for 25% of variability in willingness to fight and die.

Trolley dilemma. In scenario (a) self-sacrifice to save 5 fellow Trump supporters, participants indicating that they would hypothetically sacrifice their life to save five fellow Trump supporters had a higher total fusion score compared to those hypothetically choosing to do nothing (Table 3).

In trolley dilemma scenario (b) self-sacrifice to save 1 fellow or 5 opposition supporters, a one-way between-subjects ANOVA revealed a significant effect of dilemma choice on fusion score (Table 3). *Post-hoc* tests ($p < 0.05$, Tukey's HSD) indicated

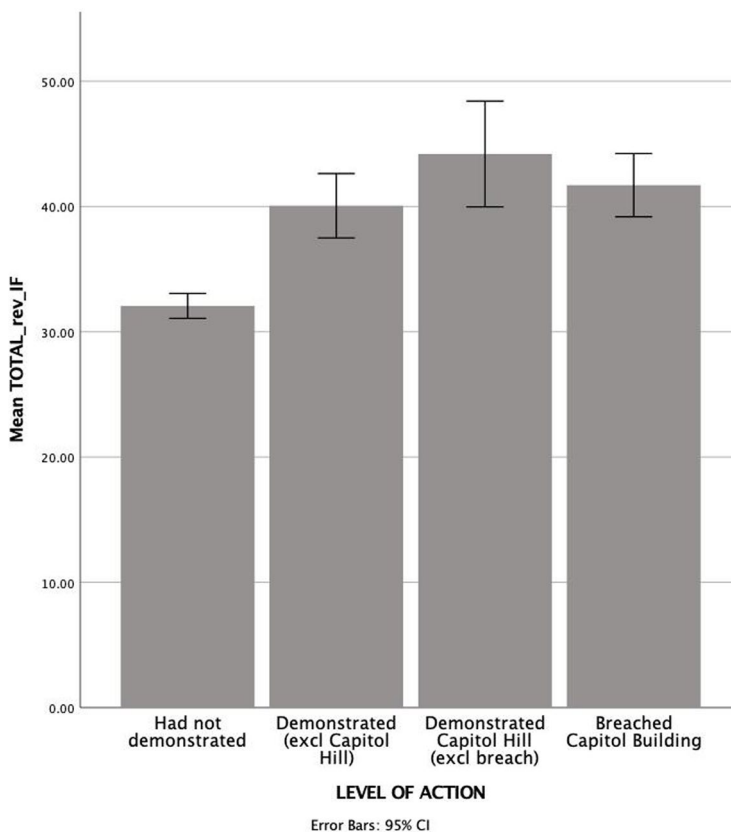


Figure 6. Mean fusion score by level of previous action.

significant differences between all pairings, showing that, compared to those who would choose to do nothing, there was a higher degree of fusion amongst individuals who would hypothetically self-sacrifice to save 5 opposition campaigners whilst abandoning 1 fellow Trump supporter. This was higher again for those who would hypothetically self-sacrifice to save 1 fellow Trump supporter, abandoning 5 opposition supporters. These findings suggest that increased fusion score was associated with increased hypothetical self-sacrifice on behalf of the group.

Political violence.

- a. *To prevent the group from being forcibly dismantled.* A one-way between-subjects ANOVA revealed a significant effect on fusion score of the hypothetical willingness to undertake political violence to prevent the Trump support group from being dismantled (Table 4). *Post-hoc* tests ($p < 0.001$, Tukey's HSD) indicated significant differences between all pairings other than between "I might do" and "I would do."
- b. *To achieve Trump's aims.* Similarly, a one-way between-subjects ANOVA revealed a significant effect on fusion score of the hypothetical willingness to undertake political violence to achieve Trump's aims (Table 4). *Post-hoc* tests ($p < 0.001$, Tukey's HSD) indicated significant differences between all pairings other than between "I might do" and "I would do."

In summary, high fusion scores were associated with greater "might" or "would do" responses to questions of hypothetical political violence both to prevent the group being dismantled and to achieve Trump's goals.

Combination of measures

Multiple regression analysis indicated that increases in fusion score and distance of ideal self - *self before* combined with decreases in CPVAF1 values to significantly predict higher scores on the willingness to fight and die for the group scale (Table 2).

Previous and prospective action

As both *actual* and *hypothetical* extreme behavior data were collected, it was possible to explore the relationship between the two.

Willingness to fight and die for the group. A one-way between-subjects ANOVA revealed a significant effect of the level of previous action on willingness to fight and die for the group score (Table 1). *Post-hoc* analyses ($p < .001$, Tukey's HSD) indicated a higher willingness to fight and die for the group score in the following pairings: those who "Breached the Capitol Building" compared to those who "Had not demonstrated" and those who "Had demonstrated, but not at Capitol Hill"; those who "Had demonstrated at Capitol Hill, but did not breach Capitol Building" compared to those who "Had not demonstrated" and those who "Had demonstrated, but not at Capitol Hill"; those who "Had demonstrated, but not at Capitol Hill" compared to those who "Had not demonstrated."

To summarize, willingness to fight and die for the group scores increased with greater (more extreme) previous actions (Figure 7).

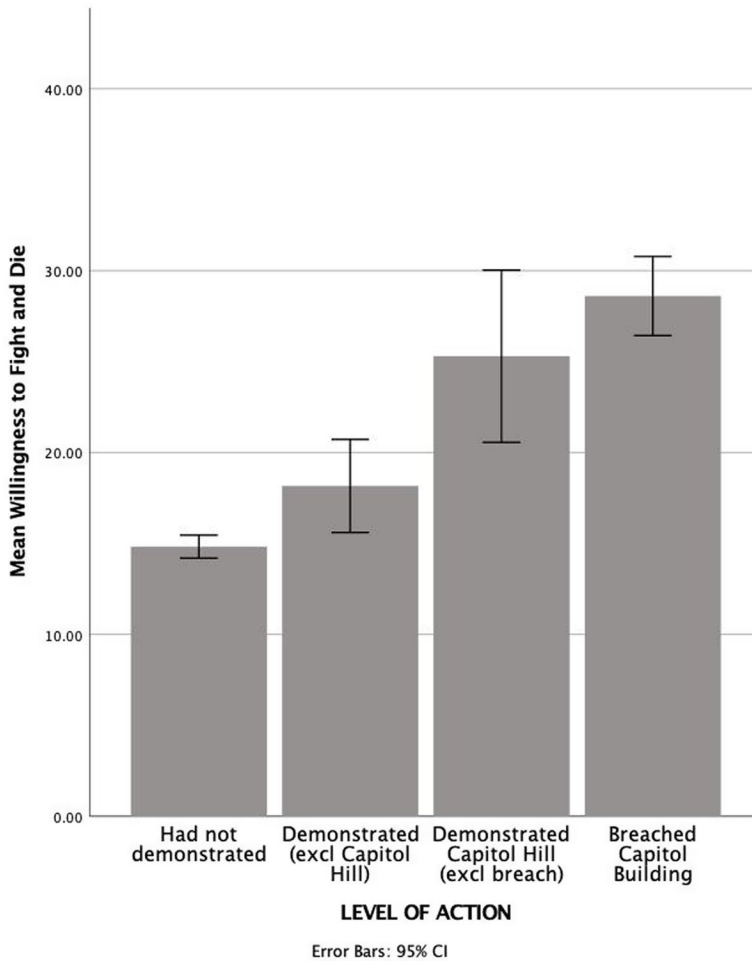


Figure 7. Mean willingness to fight and die for the group scores by previous level of action.

Trolley dilemma. The hypothetical choice to self-sacrifice to save 5 fellow Trump supporters as opposed to “do nothing” was higher than expected for those who “Had demonstrated,” were “Present at Capitol Hill” or had “Breached the Capitol Building,” and lower than expected for those who “Had not demonstrated,” $\chi^2(3, 420) = 56.10, p < .001$. Similarly, in the second trolley scenario, the hypothetical choice to self-sacrifice as opposed to “do nothing” was higher than expected for those who “Had demonstrated,” were “Present at Capitol Hill” or “Breached the Capitol Building,” and lower than expected for those who “Had not demonstrated,” $\chi^2(6, 420) = 78.63, p < .001$. In summary, increased level of previous action was associated with increased hypothetical willingness to self-sacrifice, on a prospective measure.

Political violence. To prevent the group from being forcibly dismantled. Actual frequency of hypothetical willingness to undertake political violence if the Trump support community were to be forcibly dismantled was higher than expected frequency for those who “Had demonstrated, but not at Capitol Hill,” those who “Had demonstrated at

Capitol Hill, but did not breach the Capitol Building” and those who “Breached the Capitol Building” whilst lower than expected for those who “Had not demonstrated,” $\chi^2(6, 420) = 163.29, p < .001$.

To achieve Trump's goals. Actual frequencies of those who “might” or “would” undertake hypothetical political violence to support Trump’s aims were higher than expected in those who were “Present at Capitol Hill” and those who “Breached the Capitol building” and lower than expected in those who “Had never demonstrated” or who “Had demonstrated but were not present at Capitol Hill,” $\chi^2(6, 420) = 171.48, p < .001$.

Again, an increased level of previous action was associated with an increased level of prospective action (hypothetical political violence).

Relationship between construing and fusion measures

The distance of fellow supporters from the ideal self was significantly negatively correlated with the fusion score, Pearson’s $r(364) = -0.16, p < .001$. That is, the more positively fellow supporters were construed, the higher the degree of fusion. No other significant correlations were found between the measures of construing and the fusion scale.

Discussion

Several of the findings of the study were consistent with the Constructivist Model of Radicalization and with Identity Fusion Theory, as will be detailed below.

Processes of construing and the constructivist model of radicalization

Results suggested that those involved in greater action in support of Trump, both actual and hypothetical, had a less adaptable way of seeing the world, as shown by their lower cognitive complexity, as indicated by lower CPVAF1 values. This association with both actual and hypothetical extreme behavior provides further evidence to support aspects of the constructivist model (Winter & Feixas, 2019, p. 4), which proposes that those with “undifferentiated (and thus inflexible) construct system[s] may be particularly vulnerable.” It is also consistent with findings from previous studies of activists (e.g., Mason et al., 2021), and provides a strong indication of the validity of the model.

The finding that participants viewed themselves more positively on becoming a Trump supporter suggests a possible motivation to begin and continue supporting Trump. The apparent increase in self-esteem after becoming a Trump supporter, indicated by a decreased distance from the ideal self, was found to be greater in those who had previously undertaken the most extreme action, and those who scored more highly on the measure of willingness to fight and die for the group. Importantly, those who breached the Capitol Building, whilst also gaining improved self-esteem on becoming a Trump supporter, displayed the lowest self-esteem both before and after supporting Trump. This may reflect the greater benefit of belonging to a group for those with low self-esteem, perhaps leading to the point of fusion (and the willingness to act

associated with it). Indeed, these individuals displayed the greatest degree of fusion in the study. Furthermore, as the association of low self-esteem with violence has been well-documented (e.g., Walker & Bright, 2009), it may be that low self-esteem contributes both as a driver of fusion, and its consequential actions and also as a need to undertake violence *per se*, to increase a sense of power (Ostrowsky, 2010). In addition to increased self-esteem, there was also evidence of greater salience (meaningfulness) of self-construing after becoming a Trump supporter, consistent with the constructivist model's assertion that "radical beliefs, usually drawing upon available social constructions, allow the development of a "turning point" in the individual's "sense of identity with a more structured and certain view of the world." (Winter & Feixas, 2019, p. 4)

Also consistent with the hypotheses was the finding that anti-Trump activists were construed more negatively than fellow Trump supporters. Negative construing of an out-group can enhance the positivity of the view of one's in-group and oneself, and contributes to enhanced self-esteem, as described in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Negative construing likely contributed both to the motivation to become a Trump supporter and the positive self-view associated with it. This lends further support to the constructivist model: "The development of an extreme negative construction of another group ...allows further definition of the self by contrast with this group." (Winter & Feixas, 2019, p. 4).

Furthermore, with results relating to both actual and hypothetical extreme behavior, there is an indication that repertory grid technique may have an important role in understanding extremism and could also be considered in the development of a risk assessment tool. Its low demand characteristics make it particularly useful, notably in combination with the measure of identity fusion, as both are significant predictors of measures of extreme behavior, actual *and* hypothetical.

Identity fusion

The findings that most of the study population displayed substantial fusion, and more so those who had actually or were hypothetically willing to undertake more extreme actions in support of Trump, are supportive of Identity Fusion Theory (Swann et al., 2009, 2012), which contends that fusion to a group increases the willingness to undertake pro-group actions. Identity fusion was perhaps particularly high in this study due to the partisan nature of support for Trump, and the polarized political environment of the United States at the time. Such polarity would heighten both in- and out-group salience, resulting in increased fusion.

Trump's oratory reveals and perhaps encourages fused attachment, as exemplified in his video message of January 6, 2021:

"I know your pain. I know you're hurt. We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election, and everyone knows it, especially the other side, but you have to go home now. We love you. You're very special." (Congressional Record, 2021, p. 616)

This quote, incidentally, provides an example of a further aspect of the constructivist model that was not investigated in the present study, the use of "hostility" in Kelly's

sense, that is, rather than accepting that a construction (in this case, “We shall win the election”) has been invalidated, attempting to extort evidence for the construction.

The type of “fused” vocabulary used by Trump was echoed by his supporters. For example, as cited in Jackson and Hinsz (2022):

“We broke into the Capitol ... we got inside; we did our part. We were looking for Nancy to shoot her in the friggin’ brain, but we didn’t find her.” (Congressional Record, 2021, p. 620)

The sense of collective engendered by such language is compelling and reflects individuals’ immersion in the Trump community, and their deep emotional bonds, indicative of identity fusion.

With regards to membership of Trump supporter groups, this ranged from 28% for the entire sample to a remarkable 96% of those who breached the Capitol Building. This is in line with fusion scores, as might be expected. Court records indicate that only a minority of those charged on January 6 (77 of 650) were members of Far-Right extremist groups (Blazak, 2022). Whilst this may initially appear counter to the study results, it is not actually surprising. Our findings are consistent with Identity Fusion Theory and indicate that being fused to a non-extreme group is sufficient to engender extreme pro-group behavior, including violent action. A predominance of “ordinary” individuals was involved in the insurrection, rather than the anticipated (and organized) Far Right. This perhaps should be of greater concern. Indeed, its importance cannot be overemphasized. As a society, we need to remain cognizant of the fact that it is “ordinary” people who become fused to a group and may follow the path of radicalization. As one federal judge asked,

“[How have] good people who never got into trouble with the law ... morphed into terrorists?” (Weiner et al., 2021).

Extreme pro-group action, actual and hypothetical

The fusion measure was predictive of willingness to fight and die for the group. Higher fusion scores were also associated with increased actual action previously undertaken. This provides a distinct indication that identity fusion combined with the repertory grid measures, although the patterns of their relationships with measures of extreme action were somewhat different, are an effective means of examining the process involved in radicalization and have potential to be developed within a portfolio of risk assessment tools.

A sizeable proportion of the study population (21%) hypothetically agreed to sacrifice their life to save a fellow Trump supporter above others. This illustrates the willingness of the “ordinary” population (i.e., those who are not necessarily part of an extremist organization) to sacrifice their own lives. Similarly, 20% were hypothetically willing to partake in damage to people and property to maintain the Trump community and to achieve Trump’s aims. Perhaps as expected, this was greater in those who had actually undertaken greater levels of support for Trump previously (over 96%), and in those who were identified as more strongly fused. These findings

support the findings of Kunst et al. (2019) that fusion with Trump predicted a greater willingness to participate in political violence, including the violent persecution of minority groups and willingness to challenge election results. This is particularly pertinent given that a proportion of the present study were involved in the insurrection at Capitol Hill with that precise aim.

Insurrection, Capitol Hill, January 6, 2021

The study captured a sample of individuals who were involved in the insurrection of January 6, 2021, of which 28 participants had been involved in the storming of the Capitol Building. The data acquired indicated that, compared to the rest of the study population, those involved in this extreme act experienced the greatest benefit to their self-esteem when they became a Trump supporter. They also construed anti-Trump activists the most negatively and had the lowest cognitive complexity (least differentiated construct systems). They also scored most highly on hypothetical measures of self-sacrifice and extreme pro-group behaviors. Finally, they were younger, better educated, more likely to be male, a member of a Trump support group, and to have been supporting Trump for a shorter period of time, suggesting that it may be the group, rather than the cause, that increases the likelihood of participation in violent political acts. We may also assume, as described in the constructivist model, that these individuals had reconstrued acts of violence as acceptable in order to engage in them (Winter & Feixas, 2019).

Strengths and limitations

Capturing participants in the study population who had actually undertaken violent extremism was highly advantageous in being able to investigate associations between both hypothetical and actual extreme behavior. Combining measures of construing and identity fusion enabled a rigorous investigation of violent extremism.

Kunst et al. (2019) proposed that fusion with Trump as a leader, compared with fusion to his supporter group, had a stronger effect on willingness to undertake extreme behavior. It would have been useful to have looked at both in this study, to be able to investigate this further.

The study took the form of an online questionnaire. Whilst robust quality assurance data checks were undertaken by both Qualtrics and the research team, it is possible that the data are not fully representative. In addition, it should be acknowledged that previous actions undertaken in support of Trump, including the breach of the Capitol Building, were self-reported and caution must therefore be applied in interpreting the data.

Conclusion

Whilst there is still debate regarding the causes of Trump's electoral loss in 2020 (Hart, 2022), what was clearly evident in the insurrection at Capitol Hill was a violent response to a perceived political injustice. That individuals are willing to undertake such personally costly acts at the behest of a distant political leader raises the

question, why? What is involved in the construing of political activists that results in violent action providing them with meaning and purpose? This study supported the value of the Constructivist Model of Radicalization and Identity Fusion Theory, together with their associated methodologies, in understanding this troubling phenomenon.

Notes

1. In view of lack of variation in some of the ratings of elements on constructs, construct similarity was assessed by calculating distances rather than correlations. While larger correlations are associated with greater similarity, the reverse is true for distances, with greater similarity associated with smaller distances. Consequently, the percentage of variance associated with the first component using this method will show smaller (rather than larger) values for less differentiated construct systems (lower cognitive complexity).
2. Distances between elements are standardised Euclidean distances, with a constant of two added in order to remedy any negative values.
3. A more detailed and technical account of the use of bootstrapping in the context of repertory grid analysis may be found in Heckmann and Bell (2016).

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the study was granted by The University of Hertfordshire Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority. The protocol number is LMS/PGR/UH/03655(4). Individuals were provided with all necessary information to enable them to choose whether or not to participate in the study, and if so, to provide their informed consent.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The study was funded by the University of Hertfordshire.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author [C.M.], upon reasonable request.

References

- Barry, D., & Frenkel, S. (2021, January 7). 'Be there. Will be wild!': Trump all but circled the date. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/us/politics/capitol-mob-trump-supporters.html>
- Bell, R. C. (2009). *GRIDSTAT: A program for analysing the data of a repertory grid* [Computer software]. <https://www.gridstat.net>
- Blazak, R. (2022). Revisiting the White boys from Portland to Ukraine: Anomie and right-wing extremism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 68(2), 216–240. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642221108940>

- Buhrmester, M. D., Fraser, W. T., Lanman, J. A., Whitehouse, H., & Swann, W. B. Jr. (2015). When terror hits home: Identity fused Americans who saw Boston bombing victims as “family” provided aid. *Self and Identity*, 14(3), 253–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2014.992465>
- Canter, D., Sarangi, S., & Youngs, D. (2014). Terrorists’ personal constructs and their roles: A comparison of the three Islamic terrorists. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 19(1), 160–178. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8333.2012.02067.x>
- Caputi, P., Viney, L. L., Walker, B. M., & Crittenden, N. (2012). *Personal construct methodology*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Congressional Record (2021). Trial of Donald J. Trump, President of the United States. *Congressional Record*, 167(25), S615–S644. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/html/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.htm>
- Foot, P. (1967). The problem of abortion and the doctrine of double effect in virtues and vices. *Oxford Review*, 5, 5–15.
- Ginges, J., & Atran, S. (2011). War as a moral imperative (not just practical politics by other means). *Proceedings. Biological Sciences*, 278(1720), 2930–2938. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2010.2384>
- Gómez, A., Brooks, M. L., Buhrmester, M. D., Vázquez, A., Jetten, J., & Swann, W. B. Jr. (2011). On the nature of identity fusion: Insights into the construct and a new measure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100(5), 918–933. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022642>
- Gómez, A., Chinchilla, J., Vázquez, A., López-Rodríguez, L., Paredes, B., & Martínez, M. (2020). Recent advances, misconceptions, untested assumptions, and future research agenda for identity fusion theory. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 14(6), e12531. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12531>
- Gómez, Á., Morales, J. F., Hart, S., Vázquez, A., & Swann, W. B. Jr. (2011). Rejected and excluded forevermore, but even more devoted: Irrevocable ostracism intensifies loyalty to the group among identity-fused persons. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37(12), 1574–1586. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167211424580>
- Gramlich, J. (2020). What the 2020 electorate looks like by party, race and ethnicity, age, education and religion. Pew Research Centre. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/26/what-the-2020-electorate-looks-like-by-party-race-and-ethnicity-age-education-and-religion/>
- Grice, J. W. (2002a). *Idiogrid: Software for the management and analysis of repertory grids* [Computer software]. <https://www.idiogrid.com>
- Grice, J. W. (2002b). Idiogrid: Software for the management and analysis of repertory grids. *Behavior Research Methods, Instruments, & Computers: A Journal of the Psychonomic Society, Inc.*, 34(3), 338–341. <https://doi.org/10.3758/bf03195461>
- Hart, R. P. (2022). Why Trump lost and how? A rhetorical explanation. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 66(1), 7–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764221996760>
- Heckmann, M., & Bell, R. C. (2016). A new development to aid interpretation of hierarchical cluster analysis of repertory grid data. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 29(4), 368–381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2015.1134368>
- Hogg, M. A., Kruglanski, A., & Van den Bos, K. (2013). Uncertainty and the roots of extremism. *Journal of Social Issues*, 69(3), 407–418. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12021>
- Jackson, J. W., & Hinsz, V. B. (2022). Group dynamics and the US Capitol insurrection: An introduction to the special issue. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 26(3), 169–177. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gdn0000193>
- Kelly, G. A. (1955/1991). *The psychology of personal constructs*. Norton (reprinted by London).
- Kinsman, L., & Frimer, J. A. (2021). A psychological profile of extreme Trump supporters. In J.-W. van Prooijen (Ed.), *The psychology of political polarization* (Ch. 4., pp. 53–76). Routledge.
- Kruglanski, A. W., Chen, X., Dechesne, M., Fishman, S., & Orehek, E. (2009). Fully committed: Suicide bombers’ motivation and the quest for personal significance. *Political Psychology*, 30(3), 331–357. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2009.00698.x>
- Kunst, J. R., Dovidio, J. F., & Thomsen, L. (2019). Fusion with political leaders predicts willingness to persecute immigrants and political opponents. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 3(11), 1180–1189. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0708-1>

- Mason, C. B., Winter, D. A., Schmeer, S., & Berrington, B. T. S. L. (2021). The radicalization of Brexit activists. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 798232. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.798232>
- McCauley, C., & Moskaleiko, S. (2017). Understanding political radicalization: The two-pyramids model. *The American Psychologist, 72*(3), 205–216. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000062>
- Moghaddam, F. M. (2005). The staircase to terrorism: A psychological exploration. *The American Psychologist, 60*(2), 161–169. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.2.161>
- Newson, M., Buhrmester, M., & Whitehouse, H. (2016). Explaining lifelong loyalty: The role of identity fusion and self-shaping group events. *PLOS One, 11*(8), e0160427. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0160427>
- Ostrowsky, M. K. (2010). Are violent people more likely to have low self-esteem or high self-esteem? *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 15*(1), 69–75. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2009.08.004>
- Palazzolo, J., Ailworth, E., & Davis O'Brien, R. (2021, February). Most capitol riot suspects have no far right group ties a challenge in fight against extremism. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/most-capitol-riot-suspects-have-no-far-right-group-ties-a-challenge-in-fight-against-extremism-11613139086>
- Swann, W. B.Jr., Gómez, Á., Buhrmester, M. D., López-Rodríguez, L., Jiménez, J., & Vázquez, A. (2014). Contemplating the ultimate sacrifice: Identity fusion channels pro-group affect, cognition, and moral decision making. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 106*(5), 713–727. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035809>
- Swann, W. B.Jr., Gómez, A., Huici, C., Morales, J., & Hixon, J. G. (2010). Identity fusion and self-sacrifice: Arousal as a catalyst of pro-group fighting, dying, and helping behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 99*(5), 824–841. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020014>
- Swann, W. B.Jr., Gómez, Á., Seyle, D. C., Morales, J., & Huici, C. (2009). Identity fusion: The interplay of personal and social identities in extreme group behaviour. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 96*(5), 995–1011. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013668>
- Swann, W. B.Jr., Jetten, J., Gómez, Á., Whitehouse, H., & Bastian, B. (2012). When group membership gets personal: A theory of identity fusion. *Psychological Review, 119*(3), 441–456. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028589>
- Tajfel, H. (1978). *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations*. Academic Press.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict in psychology of intergroup relations. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
- United States Census Bureau (2022). Educational attainment table 2021. <https://www.census.gov/content/census/en/data/tables/2019/demo/educational-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html>
- United States National Institute of Justice (2015). Radicalization and violent extremism: Lessons learned from Canada, the UK, and the US. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/249947.pdf>
- Varmann, A. H., Kruse, L., Bierwaczonok, K., Gómez, Á., Vázquez, A., & Kunst, J. R. (2023). How identity fusion predicts extreme pro-group orientations: A meta-analysis. *European Review of Social Psychology, 35*(1), 162–197.
- Vázquez, A., Ordoñana, J. R., Whitehouse, H., & Gómez, Á. (2019). Why die for my sibling? The positive association between identity fusion and imagined loss with endorsement of self-sacrifice. *International Journal of Social Psychology, 34*(3), 413–438. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02134748.2019.1639343>
- Walker, J. S., & Bright, J. A. (2009). False inflated self-esteem and violence: A systematic review and cognitive model. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology, 20*(1), 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14789940701656808>
- Weiner, R., Hsu, S., Jackman, T., & Jayaraman, S. (2021). Desperate, angry, destructive: How Americans morphed into a mob. *Washington Post* [Online]. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/11/09/rioters-charges-arrests-jan-6-insurrection/>
- Whitehouse, H., McQuinn, B., Buhrmester, M., & Swann, W. B.Jr. (2014). Brothers in arms: Libyan revolutionaries bond like family. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 111*(50), 17783–17785. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1416284111>

Winter, D. A. (2011). Radicalisation as a constructive choice: Possible research directions. In G. M. Ruggiero, S. Sassaroli, Y. Latzer, & S. Suchday (Eds.), *Perspectives on immigration and terrorism* (pp. 115–119). IOS Press.

Winter, D. A., & Feixas, G. (2019). Towards a constructivist model of radicalization and deradicalization: A conceptual and methodological proposal. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 412. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00412>

Winter, D. A., & Muhanna-Matar, A. (2020). Cycles of construing in radicalization and deradicalization: A study of Salafist Muslims. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 33*(1), 58–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2018.1536904>

Winter, D. A., & Tschudi, F. (2015). Construing a “perfect knight”: A personal construct investigation of mass murder. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 28*(2), 139–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2013.846837>

Wolfowicz, M., Litmanovitz, Y., Weisburd, D., & Hasisi, B. (2021). Cognitive and behavioral radicalization: A systematic review of the putative risk and protective factors. *Campbell Systematic Reviews, 17*(3), e1174. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1174>

Appendix A

Online administration of repertory grid

The Qualtrics survey facility is unable to accommodate repertory grids in their conventional format (e.g., Figure 1). However, bipolar matrix tables are available, and these were adapted as follows: Each element was presented in turn, together with a bipolar matrix containing all constructs, and the ability to rate each on a scale of 1–7 (Figure A1). Participants moved from one element to the next, as they progressed through the webpages of the survey.

Please provide a rating between 1 and 7, to show where you think the person sits between each of the paired words.

Me BEFORE I started campaigning for Donald Trump

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Politically engaged	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Not politically engaged
Activist	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Less outspoken
Democratic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Undemocratic
Compassionate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Lacking compassion
Informed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Ill informed
Intelligent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Not intelligent
Having integrity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Not having integrity
Kind	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Inkind

Figure A1. Adapted repertory grid for online administration (example page).

Verbal fusion scale (Gómez, Brooks, et al., 2011)

Items are responded to on a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*).

1. I am one with other Trump supporters
2. I feel immersed in the Trump support group
3. I have a deep emotional bond with other Trump supporters
4. The Trump support group is for me
5. I do more for the Trump support group than any other Trump supporter would do
6. I am strong because of the Trump support group
7. I make the Trump support group strong

Willingness to fight and die for the group scale (Swann et al., 2009)

Items are responded to on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*).

1. 'I would fight someone who was physically threatening another Trump supporter'
2. 'I would fight someone who was insulting or making fun of Trump supporters as a group'
3. 'I would help others get revenge on someone who insulted a Trump supporter'
4. 'Hurting other people is acceptable if it means protecting Trump supporters'
5. 'I'd do anything to protect Trump supporters'
6. 'I would sacrifice my life if it saved another Trump supporter's life'
7. 'I would sacrifice my life if it gave the Trump support community status or monetary reward'