



The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues

Friday, June 17, 2016

**Open Letter: Research Sheds Light onto Violent Extremism,
Let Research Also Shed Light onto Gun Violence**

Like countless prior shootings, the horrific Orlando massacre raises fundamental questions about the psychological factors that prompt otherwise unremarkable individuals to carry out unspeakable atrocities. In the United States in particular, these tragic events also beg a number of questions: **What would compel someone to commit such a horrific crime? Does the easy availability of guns in our nation play a role in the frequency and scale of such events? Do we have the evidence base we need to understand and better prevent gun violence?**

In this as in other cases of violent extremism, the perpetrator radically deviates from widely accepted societal norms of conduct. Although we as a society can scarcely begin to understand this devastating event, psychological theory and research on radicalization into violence might help illuminate some of the underlying mechanisms and processes.

Dr. Arie Kruglanski, a Distinguished University Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Maryland-College Park, in partnership with other researchers, has conducted studies on violent radicalization in conflict zones around the world. Their research has found that the quest for personal significance, in one's own eyes and in those of relevant others, is an important driving force underlying radicalization. In many cases, the quest for significance is spurred by a threat to significance, such as a sense of personal failure and humiliation, or the perceived humiliation of a group to which one belongs.

Violence is the most primordial means to dominance and a sense of power. By causing others to suffer, someone might feel consequential and capable of making others recognize his/her significance. Importantly, however, the use of violence in the service of self-significance faces two major obstacles, or restraints: (1) a moral obstacle, based on the prohibition of violence by most cultures and religions; and (2) a pragmatic obstacle, based on the difficulties in obtaining or using the tools of violence.

The first obstacle—the moral obstacle—can be overcome by finding an ideology that legitimizes aggression. The ISIL jihadist ideology does that by condoning and sanctifying violence against infidels. Other ideologies may justify violence in reference to specific groups, such as LGBT-identified individuals, Muslims, or Jews.

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The second obstacle—the pragmatic obstacle—has to do with ways of perpetrating violence. This is where the issue of gun availability comes in. The easy accessibility of guns makes their purchase and use a salient and mentally accessible means of unleashing violence against ideologically marked “culprits.”

Shootings like the one in Orlando may be related to a combination of factors: The perpetrator feels self-hate (a loss of significance), perceives violence to be a means of restoring his/her significance, does not face moral (ideological) objections to violence against his/her targets, and—importantly—does not face pragmatic obstacles to the use of violence.

In recent statements, some policy makers have argued that it is not the availability of a gun but rather the ideology of a shooter that leads to horrific violence. According to our research and analysis, however, both are central to overcoming the moral and pragmatic obstacles that inhibit people from committing gross acts of violence. **In order to prevent future massacres at the hands of violent extremists, we should work to ensure that people do not become sympathetic to ideologies that justify violence and we must make it harder for guns to get into the hands of such people.**

It is in our national interest to invest in research that can help us prevent radicalization and in research that can help us prevent gun violence. Currently, although the U.S. government does support research on radicalization prevention, it supports very little research on gun violence prevention.

In a [public statement](#) issued by the American Medical Association (AMA) on June 14, 2016, AMA President Steven J. Stack, M.D. notes that, “With approximately 30,000 men, women and children dying each year at the barrel of a gun in elementary schools, movie theaters, workplaces, houses of worship and on live television, the United States faces a public health crisis of gun violence...An epidemiological analysis of gun violence is vital so physicians and other health providers, law enforcement, and society at large may be able to prevent injury, death and other harms to society resulting from firearms.”

A [letter](#) submitted to congressional leaders on April 6, 2016 from 100+ health care, public health, scientific organizations, and research universities adds to this point, describing how a lack of public investment in gun violence research over the last 20 years has left our nation wanting in the kind of critical data we need to prevent future gun violence. This state dates back to 1996, when the “Dickey amendment”—a rider to the Labor-Health and Human Services-Education Appropriations bill that first appeared in 1996 and has been used in each subsequent annual funding bill—created a chilling effect on federally funded gun violence research.

The tragic massacre in Orlando reminds us that we still have much to learn about preventing gun violence. **As an association of scientists who study and care deeply about social issues and public well-being, we strongly urge the United States government to reaffirm its commitment to investing in research that can help our nation reduce gun violence.** Such research can and should be conducted in a nonpartisan

and agenda-free environment. With an evidence-based understanding of the problem, we can hopefully begin to find solutions to the persistent problem of gun violence.

Sincerely,
Executive Committee, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues

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The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) is an interdisciplinary association of social scientists dedicated to the proposition that sound public policy should be based on sound behavioral science. Since SPSSI's founding in 1936, we have drawn on the expertise of 3,000 members worldwide whose empirical research spans a broad range of social issues, and we help policy makers apply that research to formulate effective social policy at local, state, national, and international levels.

Acknowledgements

This letter was drafted by SPSSI member Dr. Arie Kruglanski, a Distinguished University Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Maryland-College Park, in collaboration with SPSSI Policy Director Sarah Mancoll.