

# The Need for Certainty as a Psychological Nexus for Individuals and Society

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Throughout the history of psychology, two important principles have inextricably linked a quest for knowledge formation with the formation of social groups. The first major principle states that *individuals' understandings of the world are held as true to the extent that they can be affirmed by some social group*. Leon Festinger (1950, pp. 272–273), one of social psychology's major leaders, argued that “an opinion, a belief, an attitude is perceived as ‘correct,’ ‘valid,’ and ‘proper’ to the extent that it is anchored in a group of people with similar beliefs, opinions, and attitudes.” When a subjectively held belief is socially shared, it attains the status of objectivity. In other words, “once a value is standardized and becomes common property of the group . . . it acquires objective reality” (Sherif, 1936, p. 124).

A major aspect of people's social nature is their reliance on the opinions of valued others, members of significant groups of which they are members and “in the absence of social verification, experience is transitory, random, and ephemeral. . .” (Hardin & Higgins, 1996, p. 28). Thus, social psychologists agree that only knowledge that is socially shared (by individuals whose opinions one respects) is treated as reliable, valid, and generalizable (Hardin & Higgins). Consequently, “because persons construct their beliefs in concert with their fellow members, individual knowledge is inevitably grounded in a shared reality, and a desire for shared reality is tantamount to the quest for a firm individual knowledge” (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006, p. 85). Consistent with this analysis, it has been found that individuals deprived of social contact are not able to develop intelligent thought (Cooley, 1902). Conversely, major philosophical and scientific figures are able to thrive because of their rich involvement in

conceptualization, a large body of research has found a convergent pattern of effects on a wide range of variables regardless of whether need for closure was operationalized situationally or dispositionally (for a review, see Kruglanski, 2004).

As already mentioned, a large body of evidence has accumulated in support of the idea that a heightened need for closure gives rise to a syndrome of “group centrism” (Kruglanski et al., 2006). Because groups serve as epistemic reality providers, and individuals high on the need for closure crave epistemic certainty, a heightened need for closure lends appeal to groups adept at providing a firmly anchored sense of shared reality to their members. Such groups are characterized by an homogeneity of opinions, a decision-making structure that affords a quick and unambiguous closure, and the rejection of anyone who could potentially disrupt the group’s shared reality and interfere with the process of forging such reality quickly and efficiently. Evidence for these assertions is reviewed below.

#### *Pressures to Opinion Uniformity*

If individuals under a high need for closure desire a sense of shared reality with their fellow group members, they may exert efforts to bring it about by exerting pressures on those persons to the end of forging opinion uniformity in their group. Empirical evidence suggests that this is so in fact. Thus, in a dyadic interaction study, individuals in a high (vs. low) need for closure condition reported a greater desire for agreement with their interaction partners (Kruglanski et al., 1993). Two subsequent studies extended these results by investigating conformity pressures in groups looking both at group members’ own subjective experience of the group process and ratings of such process by independent observers (De Grada, Kruglanski, Mannetti, & Pierro, 1999). Participants in groups engaged in a decision-making task. Each group was composed of four members, each playing the role of a corporate manager, with the assigned goal of determining the allocation of a cash reward for performance by employees within the company. Each group member, or manager, was responsible for representing the candidate nominated from her or his department. In their first study, De Grada and colleagues found that participants operating under a situationally heightened need for closure (by time pressure) were more task focused and less attentive to socioemotional cues during the group interaction than individuals under a lower need for closure. In a second study, groups composed of individuals dispositionally high on the need for closure reported exerting and experiencing greater conformity pressures than groups composed of individuals low on the need for closure. These perceptions were confirmed by the perceptions of independent observers who reported the same pattern. Other relevant studies yielding similar implications found that groups under a heightened need for closure tended to

appeal for one of the two camping sites (the camping site to be pitched was determined by random assignment).

When the deviant opinion was expressed early on in the discussion, at a time when group members' need for closure was likely to be low, the opinion deviant was evaluated quite positively; as positively as other group members. However, when the same deviant opinion was expressed toward the end of the discussion period where group members were under time pressure and their need for closure was likely to be high, the opinion deviant was substantially derogated and evaluatively downgraded. Deviant opinions expressed without time pressure did not lead to any changes in liking for the communicator.

Kruglanski and Webster (1991) conducted a second study using college students as participants, and had groups of four students attempt to reach consensus on the issue of drug testing among athletes. Again, confederates were placed in the group with instructions to present either a conformist or a deviant position (all subjects had been preselected to be in favor of drug testing). When the groups deliberated in the presence of a noisy computer printer, assumed to enhance the need for closure, a deviant group member was viewed less favorably than in the other conditions. The noise had no influence on the perceptions of the conformist presenter. Two additional studies using similar procedures replicated this pattern of results. The fourth study in this sequence was different in one way. Rather than a peer group member presenting the conformist or the deviant opinion, a group leader played this role. In this study, unlike the three other studies, the conformist was viewed more positively in the noisy condition than in the quiet condition. Presumably, the heightened salience of this person's role in the group process made conformity especially valued in times of high need for closure.

Deviant opinions sometimes are contained in social movements aimed at challenging conventions and group norms; these should be viewed negatively by individuals high (vs. low) on the need for closure. As a consequence, high need for closure should manifest itself in ideological conservatism and attempts to maintain group norms and traditions. The extant evidence supports this contention. Thus, Livi (2003) found that the tendency for a laboratory group to main group norms across generations of research participants was increased under a heightened need for closure. Need for closure was also found to be positively correlated to political conservatism (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a, 2003b), including studies measuring voting behavior in European contexts (Chirumbolo & Leone, 2008). Moreover, the relation between need for closure and conservatism has been found to be mediated by right wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation (Chirumbolo, 2002; Van Hiel, Pandelaere, & Duriez, 2004). Finally, Italian students high (vs. low) on the need for closure were found to be more nationalistic, religious, exhibited a preference for right wing political parties, reported anti-immigrant attitudes, scored lower on pluralism

These results suggest that loyalty to one's in-group is qualified by the degree to which it constitutes a good shared reality provider, indexed by an homogeneity of group attitudes, conservatism, and the stability of group norms. In addition, a heightened need for closure leads to attraction to out-groups possessing strongly shared realities, that high need for closure individuals may be tempted to defect to.

### *Conclusions*

The foregoing body of research suggests that the need for closure leads to what has been termed a syndrome of "group centrism" (Kruglanski et al., 2006). When need for closure is elevated, it leads to greater adherence to group norms, rejection of persons behaving inconsistently with these norms, use of autocratic decision-making structures, political conservatism, in-group favoritism, out-group derogation, and a preference for homogeneous over heterogeneous groups. Therefore, an epistemic-social nexus may exist in which an elevation in the need for closure leads to a corresponding increase in the degree to which the groupness (entitativity) and shared reality features of groups are valued by their members. In other words, intrapersonal increases in the need for closure lead to greater pressures toward the formation of strong, distinct, and coherent social groups.

## **Need for Closure and the Response to Terrorism**

Given the established link between need for closure and group centrism, we would expect that increases in the need for closure aroused by intergroup conflict would instantiate a rallying call for a tightening of the group structure and a strong response on the part of the group in defense of itself. Recently, terrorism has represented one such threat to the Western cultures. These days, the terrorism problem is framed as an issue of (homeland) security. According to Webster's Dictionary (Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1986, p. 1062) at least one sense of "security" is "being assured in opinion or expectation, having no doubt, [being] certain." In other words, the instability and insecurity fostered by terrorism may give rise to a state of psychological uncertainty, the unraveling of expectations, and the setting in of doubt.

In this vein, Osama bin Laden, the arch terrorist of our times, proclaimed that "neither America nor the people who live in it will dream of security before we live it in Palestine, and not before all the infidel armies leave the land of Muhammad," and "The Western regimes and the government of the United States of America bear the blame for what might happen. If their people do not wish to be harmed inside their very own countries, they should seek to elect

national (the killing of the film director Theo Van Gogh by Islamic terrorists in 11/04) context of terrorism, and we used the percentage of Muslims in participants' neighborhood (obtained from the Central Office of Statistics) as a proxy for the personal saliency of the threat. We found that percentage of Muslims in the participants' neighborhood significantly predicted the need for closure. Furthermore, the need for closure significantly predicted in-group identification ("I feel attached to The Netherlands," "I am happy to be Dutch"), and significantly predicted out-group derogation (measured by a feeling thermometer with respect to the out-group).

In our next study, we used a sample of Americans contacted via the Internet. As a proxy for group identification, we used the Singelis (1994) Interdependent Self-Concept Scale with items such as "It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group," and "I will sacrifice my self interest for the benefit of the group I am in." Rather than using the feeling thermometer measure of out-group derogation, we tapped participants' support for tough counterterrorism measures, including torture, secret prisons in foreign countries, the Patriot Act, and the notion that national security is more important than individual rights. We found that the need for closure was significantly related to interdependent self-construal, and to support for tough counterterrorism tactics. In other words, need for closure constitutes an important motivational basis for interdependent self-construal and tough counterterrorism.

Our fourth study addressed a somewhat different question. Notions of motivated cognition, or wishful thinking, suggest that the need for cognitive closure should be related to optimism about the restoration of closure. This, in turn, should be mediated by support for tough counterterrorism measures, perceived as means of restoring closure. Students from two American universities served as participants. The study was carried out during the two weeks following the London Transit Bombing of July 2005. Participants responded to the Shortened Need for Closure Scale, a scale tapping support for the Bush Administration's counterterrorism policies (e.g., "I think George W. Bush is the best man to lead the country in the long run," "Terrorism should be fought by any means necessary," and "I think congress ought to renew the Patriot Act without any changes"), and a scale measuring optimism about future safety from terrorism (e.g., "The United States will be able to capture Osama bin Laden," "The risk of terrorist attacks in the US has decreased as a consequence of the war in Iraq," and "I am confident that our military, civilian police, and homeland security personnel will be able to prevent future terrorist attacks inside the US"). Need for closure significantly predicted optimism about future safety from terrorism. In addition, support for tough counterterrorism significantly mediated the relationship between need for closure and optimism about future safety from terrorism.

Note that in our previous two studies, support for the President (George W. Bush) was confounded with decisive and uncompromising

(Collins, 1998; Sherif, 1936), increased liking among group members (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2002), and defense of the in-group (e.g., Orehek et al., 2010), it also presents a potentially dangerous tradeoff.

The lack of attention paid to alternative perceptions and possible courses of action means that these pressures can give rise to inaccuracies in perception, and decisions with disastrous consequences. For example, the desire to conform to one's in-group can lead to errors in judgment, even when the task is extremely simple and the correct answer is obvious (e.g., Asch, 1956) and deliberations that give rise to groupthink have been linked to the poor preparation leading up to the attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor, the Bay of Pigs invasion enacted by President Kennedy, the series of decisions by President Johnson to continue to escalate the Vietnam War, and the Watergate cover-up by President Nixon (Janis, 1972, 1982).

#### *The Appeal of Extreme Attitudes*

Quite apart from the influence of in-groups and the imperviousness to alternative viewpoints that high need for closure may induce, this motivation may lend appeal to extreme attitudes and viewpoints. By definition, the latter are clear cut and unambiguous; by glossing over nuances and intricacies they afford sweeping generalizations that permit certainty and assurance. Indeed, heightened need for closure has been linked consistently to extreme attitudes and opinions. For example, the need for closure has been positively related to support for militancy, torture, the use of secret prisons in foreign countries, and the notion that national security is more important than individual rights (Orehek et al., 2010). Other research has found links between the need for closure and stereotyping (Bar-Tal & Labin, 2001; Dijksterhuis, van Knippenberg, Kruglanski, & Schaper, 1996), racism (Roets & Van Hiel, 2006), support for militancy (Golec, Federico, Cislak, & Dial, 2005), and in-group favoritism and out-group derogation (Kruglanski et al., 2002; Shah et al., 1998). Also, the need for closure has been linked to personality traits known to give rise to extremist views, such as authoritarianism (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), including right wing authoritarianism and the social dominance orientation (Chirumbolo, 2002; Roets & Van Hiel, 2006; Van Hiel et al., 2004).

#### *Additional Bases of the Closure–Extremism Connection*

##### *Empathy*

A number of research findings related to the need for closure suggest additional paths through which the motivation to reduce uncertainty could lead to extremist ideologies. These paths may in some cases contribute to a syndrome of group centrism, yet in other cases may operate independently of it. We briefly describe them below.

When combined with the knowledge that the need for closure is related to an increased likelihood of stereotyping (e.g., Dijksterhuis et al., 1996) and in-group favoritism (Kruglanski et al., 2002; Shah et al., 1998), this points to the potential for relative extremism. If individuals operating under a need for closure are more likely to view out-groups negatively, and are also more likely to use such perceptions as markers of negotiation behavior (De Dreu et al., 1999), then these individuals are particularly likely to favor harsh treatment of out-groups in conflict management and negotiations.

Taken together, the results from these studies suggest multiple paths through which uncertainty may give rise to extremism. During times of uncertainty, the need for closure is aroused, leading to a focus on one's own perspectives and the rejection of the opinions of others. Moreover, the need for closure leads to a preference for one's own groups, leading to the stereotyping, derogation, and support for violence against out-groups. Attesting to the relative strength between need for closure and the potential for extremism, elevations in the need for closure have been associated with rejection of in-group members and even support for violence against in-group members in the form of imprisonment and capital punishment should they defect from the group norms. In addition to the harsh treatment of others, individuals high (vs. low) on the need for closure have been shown to be less likely to be empathetic, further reducing the likelihood that they would change their opinions when presented with the harmful effects of their worldviews on others. This body of research demonstrates the paths through which uncertainty at the individual level may motivate an individual to form and join groups with extremist ideologies, and the way in which the continued pressure to remain certain in personally held views would buffer the individual from experiencing and attending to the harmful consequences of their worldview for their interpersonal relations, and ultimately for their own interests.

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