“Why do people join extremist groups and engage in terrorist acts? What are the psychological consequences of rising social, political, and economic uncertainty around the world? This excellent volume by Hogg and Blaylock addresses these and related questions in a timely collection of chapters written by leading scholars. It is a ‘must read’ for social scientists and students interested in the psychology of uncertainty and terrorism.”

Brenda Major, University of California-Santa Barbara

“The editors have assembled a distinguished group of scholars who, in an impressive collection of empirically based chapters, illuminate the psychology of extremism. The central theme that extremism can be rooted in many normal social psychological processes is provocative, with significant scholarly and practical implications. This work offers valuable insights, complementing analyses from other disciplines, into a timely international issue.”

John F. Dovidio, Yale University

“This theoretically diverse collection illustrates lucidly how uncertainty may give rise to extremism in many forms, from self-destructive acts of adolescents, through political behavior, to heightened moral affirmation and acts of terrorism. A superb volume.”

Miles Hewstone, University of Oxford

The significance of extremism in our lives is enormous, and understanding the social conditions and individual psychology that sponsor these behaviors is one of the greatest challenges of the future. One factor associated with extremism is uncertainty. This book examines the critical underlying relationship between uncertainty and related constructs, on the one hand, and extremist phenomena, on the other. The text presents cutting-edge scientific research on this relationship, as leading scholars investigate the extent to which the psychology of uncertainty may cause extremism in certain circumstances.

Contributions are drawn internationally and from a broad academic spectrum, which includes psychology, neuroscience, leadership studies, and the study of religion. The contributions are diverse and eclectic in their perspectives, and each adopts a distinct perspective on extremism that focuses on a wide variety of different forms, facets, and manifestations.

Michael A. Hogg is Professor of Social Psychology at Claremont Graduate University.

Danielle L. Blaylock is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at Queen’s University, Belfast, and the University of St Andrew’s.
Praise for *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty*

“Why do people join extremist groups and engage in terrorist acts? What are the psychological consequences of rising social, political, and economic uncertainty around the world? This excellent volume by Hogg and Blaylock addresses these and related questions in a timely collection of chapters written by leading scholars. It is a 'must read' for social scientists and students interested in the psychology of uncertainty and terrorism.”

*Brenda Major, University of California-Santa Barbara*

“The editors have assembled a distinguished group of scholars who, in an impressive collection of empirically based chapters, illuminate the psychology of extremism. The central theme that extremism can be rooted in many normal social psychological processes is provocative, with significant scholarly and practical implications. This work offers valuable insights, complementing analyses from other disciplines, into a timely international issue.”

*John F. Dovidio, Yale University*

“A fascinating state-of-the-art overview on the relation between extremism and uncertainty by a top-of-art set of scholars! This is a rich collection of coherent yet at the same time diverging perspectives.”

*Bertjan Doosje, University of Amsterdam*

“This theoretically diverse collection illustrates lucidly how uncertainty may give rise to extremism in many forms, from self-destructive acts of adolescents, through political behavior, to heightened moral affirmation and acts of terrorism. A superb volume.”

*Miles Hewstone, University of Oxford*

“Since September 11, a generation of researchers has been playing catch-up in trying to understand the psychology of extremism. This volume represents a huge step forward in that process.”

*Matthew Hornsey, University of Queensland*
THE CLAREMONT SYMPOSIUM ON APPLIED SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

This series of volumes highlights the important new developments on the leading edge of applied social psychology. Each volume focuses on one area in which social psychological knowledge is being applied to the resolution of a social problem. Within that area, a distinguished group of authorities present chapters summarizing recent theoretical views and empirical findings, including the results of their own research and applied activities. The preface frames the material, pointing out common themes and varied areas of practical applications. Each volume brings together trenchant new social psychological ideas, research results, and fruitful applications bearing on an area of current social interest. This volume will be of value not only to practitioners and researchers, but also to students and lay people interested in this vital and expanding area of psychology.

The Changing Realities of Work and Family: A Multidisciplinary Approach
Edited by Amy Marcus-Newhall, Diane F. Halpern, and Sherylle J. Tan

Understanding Organ Donation: Applied Behavioral Science Perspectives
Edited by Jason T. Siegel and Eusebio M. Alvaro

Empirical Research in Teaching and Learning: Contributions from Social Psychology
Edited by Debra Mashek and Elizabeth Yost Hammer

Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty
Edited by Michael A. Hogg and Danielle L. Blaylock
Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty

Edited by

Michael A. Hogg and Danielle L. Blaylock
# Contents

Notes on Contributors vii  
Preface: From Uncertainty to Extremism xv  
*Michael A. Hogg and Danielle L. Blaylock*

## Part I: Theories and Concepts 1

1. The Need for Certainty as a Psychological Nexus for Individuals and Society  
   *Arie W. Kruglanski and Edward Orehek*  
   3

2. Self-Uncertainty, Social Identity, and the Solace of Extremism  
   *Michael A. Hogg*  
   19

3. Extremism Is Normal: The Roles of Deviance and Uncertainty in Shaping Groups and Society  
   *Dominic Abrams*  
   36

4. The Psychology of the Absurd: How Existentialists Addressed (and Succumbed to) Extremist Beliefs  
   *Travis Proulx*  
   55

5. Radical Worldview Defense in Reaction to Personal Uncertainty  
   *Kees van den Bos and Annemarie Loseman*  
   71

6. The Uncertainty-Threat Model of Political Conservatism  
   *John T. Jost and Jaime L. Napier*  
   90

## Part II: Individuals and Groups 113

7. Dying to Be Popular: A Purposive Explanation of Adolescent Willingness to Endure Harm  
   *Jason T. Siegel, William D. Crano, Eusebio M. Alvaro, Andrew Lac, David Rast, and Vanessa Kettering*  
   115
8 The Extremism of Everyday Life: Fetishism as a Defense against Existential Uncertainty
Mark J. Landau, Zachary K. Rothschild, and Daniel Sullivan

9 Religious Zeal after Goal Frustration
Ian McGregor, Kyle A. Nash, and Mike Prentice

10 Dehumanization, Demonization, and Morality Shifting: Paths to Moral Certainty in Extremist Violence
Roger Giner-Sorolla, Bernhard Leidner, and Emanuele Castano

11 Light from Dark: Uncertainty and Extreme Positive Acts Toward the “Other”
Todd L. Pittinsky

Part III: Groups and Society

12 Uncertainty, Insecurity, and Ideological Defense of the Status Quo: The Extremitizing Role of Political Expertise
Christopher M. Federico and Grace M. Deason

13 Authoritarianism, Need for Closure, and Conditions of Threat
Jennifer L. Merolla, Jennifer M. Ramos, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister

14 Constructing Extremism: Uncertainty Provocation and Reduction by Extremist Leaders
Viviane Seyranian

15 Collective Uncertainty and Extremism: A Further Discussion on the Collective Roots of Subjective Experience
Fathali M. Moghaddam and Karen Love

16 Uncertainty, and the Roots and Prevention of Genocide and Terrorism
Ervin Staub

Index
Notes on Contributors

Editors

Michael A. Hogg (PhD, Bristol University) is Professor of Social Psychology at Claremont Graduate University. He is a fellow of numerous associations, including the Association for Psychological Science, the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, and the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, and is the 2010 recipient of the Carol and Ed Diener Award in Social Psychology from the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. Foundation editor of *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* and a former associate editor of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Hogg has published widely on group processes and intergroup relations, and is best known for his work on social identity processes.

Danielle L. Blaylock (PhD, Claremont Graduate University) is a joint Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Queens University Belfast and the University of St Andrews. With Drs John Levine and Michael Hogg, she served as the managing editor of the *Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*. Her research focuses on crowd dynamics, intergroup conflict, and social change and is closely associated with social identity theory. Her current program of research has two main branches—the first examines the relationship between the recognition of shared identity and group formation and the second focuses on the impact of intergroup structures on intergroup emotions and subsequent intergroup behaviors.

Authors

Dominic Abrams (PhD, University of Kent) is Professor of Social Psychology and Director of the Centre for the Study of Group Processes at the University of Kent. He is a former Secretary of the EASP, a fellow of the APS, SPSP, and SESP, and council member and fellow of both SPSSI and the Academy of Social Sciences. He received the 2009 BPS President’s Award for Distinguished Contribution to Psychological Knowledge. Foundation editor of *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, he publishes widely on group and intergroup processes in social and
developmental psychology. He codesigned the European Social Survey ageism module and national surveys of prejudice, reporting regularly to the Equality and Human Rights Commission and UK government.

**Eusebio M. Alvaro** (PhD, University of Arizona) is Research Associate Professor and Co-Director, Health Psychology and Prevention Science Institute, at Claremont Graduate University. His basic research involves the study of social influence processes with an emphasis on resistance to persuasion, biased message processing, indirect effects of persuasive messages, and mechanisms by which minorities can achieve change. His applied research and evaluation activities involve persuasion in the context of health promotion, disease prevention, and clinical medicine with a particular focus on the development and testing of mass media messages targeting health behavior change. His applied work has been funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and the Centers for Disease Control.

**Emanuele Castano** (PhD, University of Louvain) is Associate Professor at the New School for Social Research, in New York. His research, which spans from intergroup conflict and reconciliation, to morality and existential psychology, has been published widely in top-tier journals and books, and has been supported by the European Union, the National Science Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation, among others. He is former associate editor of *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* and he is on the editorial board of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. He collaborates with NGOs and international organizations to target societal problems such as interethnic conflict and respect for international humanitarian law.

**William D. Crano** (PhD, Northwestern University) is Oskamp Professor of Psychology at Claremont Graduate University. He is a fellow of the American Psychological Association, the Association for Psychology Science, the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, and the Western Psychological Association. He is former Chair of the Society of Experimental Social Psychology, has served as liaison scientist for the Office of Naval Research (London), is a Fulbright Fellow (Federal University, Porto Alegre, Brazil), and a NATO Senior Scientist (University of Southampton, England). Crano’s research has been focused on persuasion, with special emphasis on minority groups, the effects of vested interest on attitude-behavior consistency, and mass-mediated adolescent drug prevention.

**Grace M. Deason** is a PhD candidate in Social and Political Psychology at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. She is interested in the social-psychological processes that perpetuate inequality (stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination) and ways they manifest in politics and the workplace. Her dissertation
research examines the role of motherhood and traditional maternal values in political campaigns.

Christopher M. Federico (PhD, University of California, Los Angeles) is Associate Professor of Psychology and Political Science at the University of Minnesota, and the director of the University of Minnesota’s Center for the Study of Political Psychology. His research interests include ideology and belief systems, intergroup relations, and the psychology of conflict-related social judgments. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the International Society of Political Psychology’s 2007 Erik Erikson Award for Early Career Achievements and the International Society for Justice Research’s 2009 Morton Deutsch Award. His work has appeared in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, and the *American Journal of Political Science*.

Roger Giner-Sorolla (PhD, New York University) is Reader in Social Psychology at the University of Kent. He currently serves as an associate editor of *Personality and Social Psychology Compass* (Group Section) and *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, and is the author of a forthcoming European Monograph on moral emotions in persons and groups. Giner-Sorolla has a background publishing in the areas of affective attitudes and motivated cognition. His current research articles and interests focus on the emotions of anger, disgust, shame, and guilt, in particular how they relate to moral judgments, cognitive processes, intergroup relations, and self-control.

John T. Jost (PhD, Yale University) is Professor of Social Psychology at New York University. His research, which addresses stereotyping, prejudice, political ideology, and system justification theory, has appeared in top scientific journals and received national and international media attention. He has published over ninety articles and chapters and four coedited books. Jost has received numerous accolades, including the Gordon Allport Intergroup Relations Prize (three times), Erik Erikson Early Career Award in Political Psychology, ISSI Early Career Award, SPSP Theoretical Innovation Prize, SESP Career Trajectory Award, and the Morton Deutsch Award for Distinguished Scholarly and Practical Contributions to Social Justice.

Vanessa Kettering is a PhD student in the Positive Developmental Psychology program at Claremont Graduate University. She is a member of the American Evaluation Association, the International Positive Psychological Association, and the Western Psychological Association. Her research interests center around understanding the link between attitudes, values, and behaviors and building an empirical basis for the utilization of best practices in health promotion efforts. Vanessa is currently working to establish the Institute for Individual and Social Well-Being at the Claremont School of Theology.
Arie W. Kruglanski (PhD, University of California, Los Angeles) is Professor of Psychology at the University of Maryland. He has published widely on human judgment and decision making, motivation, group processes, and the psychology of terrorism. His awards include the Donald Campbell Award from the Society of Personality and Social Psychology, and the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award from the Society for Experimental Social Psychology. He has served as editor of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Attitudes and Social Cognition section, editor of the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, and Associate Editor of the American Psychologist. Dr. Kruglanski presently codirects the National Center for the Study of Terrorism and the Response to Terrorism.

Andrew Lac is earning his PhD in psychology at Claremont Graduate University, and serving as Visiting Assistant Professor at Loyola Marymount University and consultant at University of Southern California. He is recipient of both the Peter M. Bentler and Robert L. Solso awards from the Western Psychological Association. His published research focuses on applying multivariate methods to disentangle how family and peer factors influence adolescent behaviors.

Mark J. Landau (PhD, University of Arizona) is an Assistant Professor in the Psychology Department at the University of Kansas. He has published on the role of existential concerns in motivating people’s striving for meaning and self-esteem. He has also published on the role of conceptual metaphor in shaping social perception and behavior.

Bernhard Leidner (PhD, The New School for Social Research) is currently a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Psychology at the University of California, Davis. His work focuses on processes of social identification and intergroup relations, primarily in the context of large social categories such as nations and ethnic groups. His research connects the social psychological areas of norms and morality (e.g., moral disengagement in response to in-group wrongdoings), intergroup threat (e.g., threat-induced shifting of moral principles such as fairness or loyalty), and social justice (e.g., reparations after in-group-committed torture; conflict resolution).

Annemarie Loseman is a PhD student in Social Psychology at Utrecht University in The Netherlands. In 2007 she was awarded a research grant by the Dutch Coordinator of Counterterrorism (together with Kees van den Bos and Bertjan Doosje) to conduct a major research project on the radicalization processes of Dutch youth. Her research interests are in this field of radicalism and terrorism, social justice, and the self.

Karen Love has degrees from Columbia and Georgetown Universities, and is conducting research on intergroup dynamics and security with particular focus on the Middle East.
Ian McGregor (PhD, University of Waterloo) is Professor of Personality and Social Psychology in the Faculty of Health at York University, Toronto, Canada. He is a fellow of the Association for Psychological Science and recipient of the Association for Research in Personality Tanaka Award. McGregor is on the editorial boards of several journals including the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, and the *European Journal of Social Psychology*. His research focuses on motivational and neural mechanisms of conflict, threat, defense, conviction, and meaning.

Jennifer L. Merolla (PhD, Duke University) is Associate Professor of Politics & Policy at Claremont Graduate University. She has published in the areas of voting and elections, public opinion, crisis, women and politics, and race and ethnic politics. Merolla’s work on conditions of crisis and public opinion is supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation. She is coauthor of *Democracy at Risk: How Terrorist Threats Affect the Public*.

Fathali M. Moghaddam is Professor, Department of Psychology, and Director of the Conflict Resolution Program, Department of Government, Georgetown University. His most recent books are *The New Global Insecurity* (2010) and *Words of Conflict, Words of War* (with Rom Harre).

Jaime L. Napier (PhD, New York University) is a Professor of Social Psychology at Yale University. She is a fellow of numerous associations, including the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, the Society of the Psychological Study of Social Issues, the International Society of Political Psychology, and the International Society of Justice Research. In addition, she is on the editorial board of *Analysis of Social Issues* and *Public Policy*. Napier’s research interests center around the psychological antecedents and social and psychological consequences of belief systems, including political and religious ideologies.

Kyle A. Nash is a graduate student at York University and is a predoctoral member of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology and the Social and Affective Neuroscience Society. Nash has published research on motivation and goal-regulation and is currently researching the social neuroscience of frustration and aggression.

Edward Orehek (PhD, University of Maryland) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Groningen. His research focuses on the role of motivational factors in human judgment and decision-making. His work has appeared in journals such as *Annual Review of Psychology, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, Journal of Personality*, and *European Journal of Social Psychology*.

Todd L. Pittinsky (PhD, Harvard University) is Associate Professor of Technology and Society at Stony Brook University. His research focuses on positive
intergroup attitudes. To date, this research has taken three forms, the study of: (a) positive stereotypes about social identity groups and educational outcomes, (b) allophilia and the Two-Dimensional Model of Intergroup Attitudes (TDMIA), and (c) ways leaders can change two dimensions of intergroup attitudes in order to bring groups together to reach common goals (intergroup leadership). His recent publications include Crossing the Divided: Intergroup Leadership in a World of Difference and “A Two-Dimensional Model of Intergroup Leadership” (American Psychologist).

Mike Prentice is a graduate student in Social and Personality Psychology at the University of Missouri-Columbia. He is a McNair Scholar and Ford Foundation Research Fellow and member of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. His research focuses on palliative beliefs, meaning, motivational mechanics of threat and defense, optimal motivation and values, and social dilemmas.

Travis Proulx (PhD, University of British Columbia) is a Professor of Social Psychology at Tilburg University. His research interests span social and developmental psychology, with a special emphasis on how meaning frameworks are formed and maintained over the course of one’s life.

Jennifer M. Ramos (PhD, University of California, Davis) is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Loyola Marymount University. She currently serves as a member-at-large for the International Studies Association-West. She has published on a variety of topics, including foreign policy, torture, terrorism, ideology, human rights, norms, and political psychology. Her work has appeared in journals such as Journal of Politics, Public Opinion Quarterly, International Studies Perspectives, and Journal of Political Ideologies.

David Rast, III is a doctoral student in social psychology at Claremont Graduate University and is currently a predoctoral Research Fellow with the Center for Army Leadership at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He was a recipient of the 2010 Outstanding Research Award for graduate student research from the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. His research interests include the effects of social identity processes on leadership and influence, and more recently the role of uncertainty in bolstering support for extremist leaders.

Zachary K. Rothschild is a graduate student at the University of Kansas. He was presented with an award for outstanding graduate research by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology and principally studies the existential motivations behind an array of human behavior.

Viviane Seyranian (PhD, Claremont Graduate University) is a Lecturer at the University of Southern California. She has received a series of fellowships and grants to support her doctoral work in social psychology including a dissertation grant to develop and test a theory called social identity framing. Her work on social
influence processes, group behavior, and leadership has been published in various journals including the *Journal of Social Issues*, the *Leadership Quarterly*, and *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*.

**Jason T. Siegel** (PhD, University of Arizona) is a Research Associate Professor at Claremont Graduate University. Dr. Siegel’s research focuses on the application of social psychological theories to the health domain. The majority of his research has focused on adolescent substance use and organ donation. His work has been published in journals such as *Health Psychology*, *Prevention Science*, and *The Journal of Adolescent Health*.

**Ervin Staub** (PhD, Stanford University) is Professor of Psychology, Emeritus, and Founding Director of the PhD program in the Psychology of Peace and Violence at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, of the Association for Psychological Science, and of other societies. He is past President of the International Society for Political Psychology and of the Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict and Violence. He served on a number of editorial boards. He has studied the influences leading to and the development of helping, caring, altruism, and the origins and prevention of genocide and other group violence. He has studied as well as engaged in promoting reconciliation in post-conflict settings. He is the author of many journal articles, book chapters, and books, the most recent being *Overcoming Evil: Genocide, Violent Conflict and Terrorism*.

**Daniel Sullivan** is a graduate student in the social psychology program at the University of Kansas. He is a recipient of a Graduate Research Fellowship from the National Science Foundation. His research interests include terror management theory and the psychology of enemyship.

**Kees van den Bos** (PhD, Leiden University) is Professor of Social Psychology at Utrecht University. He is a fellow of the Association for Psychological Science and the Society of Experimental Social Psychology, was elected by students at Utrecht University to be their psychology teacher of the year in both 2009 and 2010, and won a dissertation award of the Association of Dutch Social Psychologists. Associate Editor of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, and a former associate editor of the *European Journal of Social Psychology* and *Social Justice Research*, van den Bos has published widely on social justice, cultural worldviews, and normative behavior, and is best known for his work on uncertainty management by means of fairness judgments.

**Elizabeth J. Zechmeister** (PhD, Duke University) is Associate Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University. She is also Associate Director of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). Her published work includes studies of voting, ideology, political parties, representation, charisma,
and crisis. Zechmeister’s current research on conditions of crisis and public opinion is supported by two grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF). Zechmeister is coauthor of *Democracy at Risk: How Terrorist Threats Affect the Public* and of *Latin American Party Systems*. 
Life is an uncertain enterprise. We can never be sure about what really happened in the past, about what will happen in the future, about how others will behave, and about how we should behave. In the face of such unrelenting uncertainty, humans remain undaunted; they tenaciously set goals, make plans, and pursue actions. As John Lennon famously put it in his 1980 song “Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy)”: “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.” People work hard to feel sufficiently certain about themselves, other people, and the world they live in, to feel they are acting adaptively and charting a meaningful course through life. Overcoming, combating, and managing feelings of uncertainty play a central role in the human condition.

Life can also be a distressing enterprise. Thomas Hobbes, in his 1651 Leviathan, characterized the natural state of humankind as a war of all against all in which human life was famously described as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” In particular, people seem depressingly capable, individually or in groups, of treating others badly; ranging from unsympathetic disdain to cruelty and violence. Zealotry, ideological orthodoxy, prejudice, discrimination, terrorism, war, and genocide stalk the globe. In everyday language we often consider these behaviors “extreme” and those individuals who engage in them “extremists.” Extremism is a staple of both popular fiction and current affairs, but it is also a contested term and a rhetorical device that can be used as an insult or part of a narrative aimed at discrediting the actions of individuals and groups.

Uncertainty and extremism often appear to go together. There are many examples. The best documented is probably the global rise of national-political extremism during the Great Depression of the 1930s—developing into a shift toward fascism, communism, and nationalism that culminated in genocide and a world war that killed between 62 and 78 million people. Immediately after the war, the nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the West created uncertainty
revolving around nuclear annihilation (captured by the grim acronym MAD—mutually assured destruction)—leading to a wave of anti-Western and anti-Communist hysteria, respectively. The 1960s, particularly in the United States, was a period of rapid technological, sociocultural, and normative change that raised uncertainty about America’s future—there were race riots and antiwar demonstrations, and many young people were drawn to extreme countercultural movements such as extremist religious cults (e.g., Jim Jones’s People’s Temple), or extreme political organizations (e.g., Black Panthers).

More recently, terrorist atrocities in Britain, Spain, the United States, and other countries around the world in the early 2000s created great uncertainty and not only paved the way for zealous opposition to Islam and for wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also provided fertile ground for people to endorse wide-ranging restrictions to civil rights. Later, the global financial collapse of 2008 fueled draconian economic measures, violent protests in France and Greece, anti-immigration attitudes through much of Europe, and a reactionary shift of conservative political ideology in the United States toward radical conservatism. Finally, for more than 60 years the Middle East has been a crucible of national, cultural, territorial, and religious uncertainty that has been associated with wars, terrorism, nationalistic fervor, and religious fundamentalism.

Of course, cooccurrence, correlation, and juxtaposition do not establish causality. Although uncertainty seems a plausible contributor to the emergence of extremism, it may play a small or insignificant role, or the two may simply be correlated effects of some third causal agent. The goal of this book is to examine the causal, or otherwise, relationship between uncertainty and related constructs on the one hand, and extremist phenomena on the other. We investigate the extent to which the psychology of uncertainty may cause extremism.

The behavioral and social sciences have long been interested in understanding uncertainty and extremism. For example, the study of prejudice and discrimination and some of their most extreme manifestations is an enduring focus of study for social psychologists; political scientists and organizational and management scientists try to understand Machiavellian and narcissistic leadership; and a number of disciplines investigate how people process information and make poor or extreme decisions under uncertainty. Although many scholars have noted that extremism can appear to emerge from societal uncertainty, it is only recently that there has been a concerted effort by a critical mass of social psychologists to understand the psychology of the uncertainty–extremism relationship.

To provide an integrative forum for this work we decided to run a small conference, and then prepare a book. The book, this book, builds on the conference talks but draws in a broader set of contributions from other leading social psychologists whose research focuses on various aspects of uncertainty, extremism, and the relationship between the two.
The Conference

Claremont Graduate University (CGU), in greater Los Angeles, has hosted an annual conference on applied social psychology for 25 years. Inaugurated by Stuart Oskamp in 1986 this series of conferences is called the Claremont Symposium on Applied Social Psychology and has examined a broad range of topics within social psychology from some of the discipline’s most distinguished scholars. Our conference, entitled Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty, was run as a one-day meeting in April 2008 in Claremont on the campus of CGU. We had an audience of close to 120 individuals from across the behavioral and social sciences. They came to listen to nine talks by speakers from Britain, Canada, The Netherlands, and the United States: Dominic Abrams, Arie Kruglanski, Ian McGregor, Jennifer Merolla, Fathali Moghaddam, Todd Pittinsky, Jason Siegel, Ervin Staub, and Kees van den Bos. The talks were of course superb, and more than made up for the weather; we had waxed lyrical about Southern California’s perfect climate—so of course it was chilly, gray, heavily overcast, and drizzly.

In running the conference we were wonderfully and generously supported by the School of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences at CGU, and by a team of willing and cheerfully efficient graduate students, all from Michael Hogg’s social identity lab.

The Book

Each conference in the Claremont Symposium program generates an edited book in the Claremont Applied Social Psychology Series. For our book we included our nine conference speakers, but also approached a number of other leading scholars to widen the scope of the endeavor. This resulted in 16 chapters, lead authored by Dominic Abrams, Christopher Federico, Roger Giner-Sorolla, Michael Hogg, John Jost, Arie Kruglanski, Mark Landau, Ian McGregor, Jennifer Merolla, Fathali Moghaddam, Todd Pittinsky, Travis Proulx, Viviane Seyranian, Jason Siegel, Ervin Staub, and Kees van den Bos.

As noted above, the book examines the extent to which uncertainty may cause extremism in certain circumstances. Although primarily grounded in social psychology, the chapters are diverse and eclectic in their perspectives, each taking a slightly different approach. Some chapters are mainly overviews, some are macrotheoretical, some microtheoretical, some mainly empirical, some problem oriented, and so forth. The nature of uncertainty and its relationship to related constructs is discussed—with different authors adopting different perspectives and emphases. The chapters also adopt different perspectives on extremism and focus on a wide variety of different forms, facets, and manifestations. All chapters
to varying degrees overview and describe relevant empirical work to support their arguments. To help structure the book we have grouped the chapters on the basis of what we consider to be their principal emphases into three parts.

**Part I**

The six chapters in Part I focus principally on broader theory, and conceptual and definitional issues. In Chapter 1, Arie Kruglanski and Edward Orehek argue that people have a basic need for cognitive closure (a need to tie up cognitive loose ends and have subjectively certain knowledge about the world) that can vary in strength from person to person and from situation to situation. They argue that groups, particularly distinctive and clearly defined groups, are well placed to satisfy this need as they provide a consensual view of reality, and that this can generate a syndrome called group centrism in which people who have a strong need for closure are attracted to homogeneous groups that are intolerant of dissent. Kruglanski and Orehek go on to show how group centrism can lay the foundations for a variety of extremist behaviors, with a particular focus on terrorism.

In Chapter 2 Michael Hogg describes uncertainty-identity theory. Feelings of uncertainty about or reflecting on oneself can be aversive—they create a powerful motivation to reduce self-uncertainty that is very effectively addressed through the process of categorizing oneself as and identifying with a group. Distinctive groups that are homogeneous, clearly defined, and tightly structured are particularly well suited to self-uncertainty reduction. Hogg extends this basic motivational theory of group identification and behavior to show how more acute, enduring, and self-relevant uncertainty can lead to zealous identification with groups that are extremist—ideologically orthodox, hierarchically structured, ethnocentric, homogeneous, and intolerant of dissent.

Continuing within Chapter 2’s social identity metatheory, Dominic Abrams, in Chapter 3, argues that uncertainty and extremism are normal and fundamentally adaptive characteristics of the human condition—we need uncertainty, paradoxically, to pursue change; and we need extremism as it maps group boundaries and charts the limits of social life within which we exist as human beings. Abrams develops his point by focusing on the dynamics of deviance. He describes and develops the subjective group dynamics model to show how extreme or deviant group members can create normative and identity uncertainty within groups. Group members respond to this in a variety of different ways—they can consolidate, refine, or change the group’s identity and norms; they can derogate, persecute, or eject the deviant from the group; or a deviant subgroup can cause a normative schism in the group. Thus, extreme group members can be a potent source of change in group norms and social identity.

Chapter 4, by Travis Proulx, focuses on the nature of the construct of uncertainty and how it is positioned relative to other related constructs.
Specifically he argues that people are profoundly motivated to make their experiences of and in life meaningful—to overcome anxiety-provoking uncertainty based on violated expectations, anomalous occurrences, and the experience of existential absurdity. His analysis is grounded in the meaning maintenance model, which states that expectations that are violated in one sphere make one feel uneasy and cause one to cling more strongly to other familiar, stable, and predictable beliefs and behaviors. In particular, Proulx suggests that zealous adherence to political and moral worldviews is a particularly potent way to restore meaning after expectation-violation. Proulx’s chapter is intellectually wide-ranging in relating his discourse to the life and works of existentialist philosophers, social theorists, and literary figures, and to the thinking of leading developmental and cognitive psychologists.

In Chapter 5, Kees van den Bos and Annemarie Loseman define personal uncertainty as a hot-cognitive feeling (as opposed to a cold-cognitive assessment) of doubt about, or perception of instability in, one’s worldview. Personal uncertainty can implicitly or explicitly invoke feelings of uncertainty about self. Unfair treatment often violates people’s cultural values and worldview and is thus a powerful source of personal uncertainty that can lead people to defend their cultural worldviews—often quite strongly and extremely. Van den Bos and Loseman map out in detail some of the conditions and ways in which people zealously defend their worldviews and ideological systems, and robustly, and sometimes harshly, oppose those who threaten them.

The final chapter in Part I, Chapter 6, is by John Jost and Jaime Napier. They describe their uncertainty-threat model of political conservatism. Jost and Napier’s core argument is that uncertainty is more likely to drive people and society toward the sociopolitical right than the left, and the greater the uncertainty the more extreme the shift to the right. The rationale for this is that there is an ideological asymmetry in which psychological needs to reduce uncertainty and threat are associated with political conservatism in particular, and not political liberalism. This is because conservative ideology is resistant to change and equality—both of which serve to reduce uncertainty and are therefore particularly attractive during times of instability, uncertainty, and change.

Part II

The five chapters in Part II focus principally on how individuals alone or in groups deal with uncertainty. Chapter 7, by Jason Siegel, William Crano, Eusebio Alvaro, Andrew Lac, David Rast, and Vanessa Kettering, focuses on the extreme behaviors that adolescents are often willing to engage in for the sake of popularity. Siegel and his colleagues adopt and extend Hogg’s uncertainty-identity theory framework to argue that, among adolescents, extreme self-related uncertainty is associated with a desire to do whatever it takes, including taking risks that endanger their health and
even their life, to acquire a distinctive identity that garners peer approval. The link between uncertainty and extreme behavior is even stronger among adolescents who are particularly concerned about peer popularity. Siegel and associates describe in some detail research of theirs that supports this analysis.

In Chapter 8, Mark Landau, Zach Rothschild, and Daniel Sullivan build on terror management theory, which argues that one of the most powerful motivations in life is to reduce terror about one’s own inevitable death, and associated with this to overcome existential uncertainty—uncertainty about the meaning of life and about one’s significance in the world. According to terror management theory, existential terror and associated existential uncertainty are resolved by fervent affirmation of one’s worldview. Landau and colleagues extend this idea to explore exactly how people affirm their worldview. Given that worldviews are fictional symbolic accounts of reality that can never be decisively validated empirically, Landau and colleagues argue that people fetishize their worldviews—they grossly simplify them and focus on a restricted number of facets that they embody or concretize and imbue with enormous and wide-ranging significance. Conspiracy theories (extreme and often irrational and paranoid belief systems) are an example of uncertainty-provoked fetishism that Landau and colleagues discuss.

Chapter 9, by Ian McGregor, Kylie Nash, and Mike Prentice, focuses on how people can turn to religious extremism when they feel their important goals in life are impeded. McGregor and colleagues argue that humans share with their vertebrate relatives a very basic and psychologically hard-wired tendency to experience anxious uncertainty when accomplishment of cherished or important goals is impeded. In humans this leads to compensatory conviction and reactive approach motivation—a tendency to seek out and cling zealously to all-embracing groups and ideologically orthodox belief systems and worldviews. They argue that religious zeal fits the bill perfectly, and that “religious zeal is the motivational equivalent of other animals’ more concrete displacement reactions, such as compulsive wheel running or tail chasing.” The chapter closes with a discussion of ways to intervene—to inhibit goal impedance and anxious uncertainty from producing callous religious zeal.

The next chapter, Chapter 10, goes directly to the most extreme manifestation of extremism—human violence. Roger Giner-Sorolla, Bernhard Leidner, and Emanuele Castano argue that humans have an aversion to directly killing other human beings, but often for instrumental reasons they do so anyway. This juxtaposition of an instrumental goal and revulsion over hurting and killing raises enormous moral uncertainty that urgently seeks resolution. People may resolve this uncertainty by dehumanizing and demonizing the victims, and by engaging in morality shifting—justifying their acts as fulfilling a positive moral duty to protect the in-group and obey authority. Moral imperatives provide a powerful resolution of uncertainty, such that violent extremists and their
supporters turn a deaf ear to more reasonable and socially acceptable moral pleas because they already believe themselves to be justified.

The last chapter in Part II, Chapter 11, by Todd Pittinsky, turns the study of extremism on its head by asking when people go out of their way to engage in extreme positive acts toward out-groups and their members—a phenomenon he calls allophilia. Pittinsky describes how norms are critical to human life because they reduce uncertainty about how we and others should or will behave. Typically in-group prescriptions about how we should treat out-groups are strongly norm-governed—they are simplistic and ethnocentric, and can readily degenerate into derogatory stereotypes, prejudiced attitudes, outright hatred, and violent behavior. While these norms may reduce uncertainty, Pittinsky notes that there are always people who resist such norms and engage in extreme positive, sometimes even self-sacrificial, acts toward out-groups. Although research on allophilia is in its infancy, it suggests that allophilia may be exhibited by people who essentially have a complex and compartmentalized identity that allows the coexistence of different intergroup attitudes.

Part III

The five chapters in Part III focus principally on how uncertainty and extremism play out at the group and societal level. The first of these chapters, Chapter 12, is by Christopher Federico and Grace Deason. Federico and Deason focus on the role of uncertainty and insecurity in political conservatism and support for social inequality. They argue that uncertainty is not as direct a predictor of conservatism as previous research has shown—the relationship is more nuanced. They describe a number of studies showing that variables related to uncertainty and insecurity predict greater and more extreme support for existing social inequalities and associated policies. However, the effect is strongest among political experts—people who are ideologically savvy and well-informed about politics. This suggests that political expertise may serve to amplify the desire to avoid uncertainty, rather than motivate the sort of reasoned judgment that one might expect expertise to provide.

Chapter 13, by Jennifer Merolla, Jennifer Ramos, and Elizabeth Zechmeister, focuses on a construct often related to conservatism and support for inequality—authoritarianism. Merolla and colleagues argue that societal-level threats can activate some people’s latent predispositions toward extremist authoritarian preferences and behaviors. Under conditions of crisis people turn to intolerance and absolutism to cope with the impending uncertainty the threat brings with it. The authors report two studies in some detail, in which they empirically manipulate the salience of collective crises, such as terrorist actions and economic instability. They find that in the face of collective threat and crisis, authoritarian predispositions only weakly predict authoritarian attitudes; the relationship is
more pronounced among those who also have a relatively high need for cognition in the context of threat.

Leadership is the focus of Chapter 14, by Viviane Seyranian. Seyranian focuses on leaders as being “directors of uncertainty” who may use a variety of tactics to frame and reframe the group’s identity with the, potentially malevolent, intention of gaining social control and domination over the group. Leaders may provoke uncertainty by highlighting environmental instability, stressing the deviance of minority group members, emphasizing group failures, or making out-group threats more salient. They can then harness the power of uncertainty to encourage constituents to dis-identify with the current vision of the group and adopt a more extreme vision; one in which the group is given heightened prominence in relation to other group memberships. Seyranian discusses possible strategies a leader may use to provoke uncertainty, and strategies that people can use to inhibit extremist leadership.

In Chapter 15, Fathali Moghaddam and Karen Love characterize extremism and terrorism as dysfunctional defense mechanisms adopted by groups facing uncertainty and the potential for decline or even group extinction. Moghaddam and Love focus on contemporary Islamic fundamentalism as a case in point—describing how globalization has led to a sense of collective uncertainty among many Muslims regarding their Muslim identity and associated belief systems and practices. As a response to this existential crisis some Muslims, Islamic fundamentalists, have resorted to extreme tactics to reassert a traditional form of Muslim identity—tactics that include forcing their beliefs on other Muslims and the wider non-Muslim society, or engaging in terrorism to frighten society into supporting the normative and cultural practices of their identity. Moghaddam contextualizes his analysis by a rich personal account of Iran in 1980—after the 1979 Islamic revolution and in the run-up to the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war. The chapter closes by considering some practical implications and policy suggestions for addressing Islamic fundamentalism.

Our final chapter, Chapter 16 by Ervin Staub, serves as an integrative overview of the psychological theories and concepts that may help explain the movement from uncertainty to extremism, specifically highlighting processes that lead to terrorism and genocide. Staub makes the general point that when satisfaction of basic psychological needs, including the need for a degree of certainty in life, is blocked people pursue a variety of alternative means to satisfy the needs—some methods are relatively constructive, others more destructive. He argues that difficult life conditions such as economic uncertainty, political disorganization, or unresolved political competition, and significant social/cultural changes, may create intense uncertainty. To resolve the uncertainty and feel more secure, people turn to groups and ideologies. However, the leaders and members of such groups that people turn to often identify enemies or scapegoat a devalued group, with the consequence that groups turn against one another and embark on an escalating
path of antagonism and violence. Staub’s chapter concludes by describing prevention strategies that encourage constructive responses to difficult life conditions or group conflict, instances when these strategies have been used, and evaluations of the impact of these strategies on communities in conflict.

Themes, Directions, and Prospects

There is a clear leitmotif that runs through the chapters in this book. When people feel uncertain about some aspect of themselves, or their perceptions and beliefs, they turn to aspects of themselves or to worldviews that they do feel certain about; and they engage in behaviors that are oriented toward affirming, consolidating, and reinforcing self-conception and relevant ideological systems and worldviews. The chapters agree that this is a process that can spawn ideological orthodoxy and ethnocentrism, and sponsor intolerance of disagreement and diversity. Against the background of this wide agreement there is much diversity of emphasis and focus, and some disagreement, across the chapters.

Uncertainty itself is a problematic construct that invites further investigation. One issue is the relationship between uncertainty and associated constructs such as meaning, threat, and anxiety. To some extent this issue also connects with what aspects of uncertainty are motivating—is it the cold-cognitive epistemic dimension related to constructing a meaningful world in which one can make reliable predictions and plan effective action, or is it the hot-cognitive affective dimension to do with feelings of uneasiness and discomfort over not being sure about who one is or what will happen? It is probably more likely to be a bit of both, with situational and contextual factors and perhaps dispositional or personality dimensions affecting the relative salience of the hot versus cold dimension.

Another issue is the focus of uncertainty—what is it that people are uncertain about? Uncertainty about attitudes and perceptions may lead to attitude change to resolve the uncertainty—and more broadly to adherence to powerful self-contained explanatory belief systems and thus ideologies. However a number of chapters argue that what is motivationally important about uncertainty is the extent to which the focus of uncertainty reflects on or involves self. Chapters address this issue in different ways and with different languages. For example, some chapters talk about personal uncertainty and some about self-uncertainty—which invites the question of the extent and way in which these constructs are substantively different.

Another related difference is between a focus on uncertainty and its resolution as a group or individual process—to what extent is uncertainty related to self defined in group terms and thus resolved through group processes associated with influence and norms, or related to the autonomous self and resolved through an individualistic quest? Possibly related to this issue is the extent to which people
differ in their sensitivity to or fear of uncertainty and the manner in which they resolve it—is it tied to enduring personality differences? Or, are the experience and resolution of uncertainty tied more closely to immediate and more enduring contextual factors—variation in how different people experience uncertainty and resolve it reflecting different contexts not different personality traits.

What causes uncertainty? Most generally uncertainty exists when one does not feel able confidently to choose between alternative expectations or courses of action. This state of affairs, which is particularly acute when the implications of the expectations and actions are subjectively important, can arise when the available information relating to expectations and action is inappropriate, unreliable, inconsistent, contradictory, and ultimately untrustworthy. Thus, the discomfort of uncertainty is reduced primarily by feeling able to trust some information as being “true” and relying on it as a basis for allowing one to “know” what to expect and what to do. It is for this reason that ideological belief and value systems can be so attractive under uncertainty, why group membership and influence can play such a critical role in uncertainty reduction, and why some kinds of groups and group structures can be better suited to the job than others. The mechanics of uncertainty reduction are explored in different ways by different chapters—some focusing on information processing, some on social-cognitive processes, some on social comparison and influence processes, some on identity and self-concept dynamics, and some on combinations of these.

One interesting issue that emerges across chapters is the extent to which conservative right-wing political ideologies are better suited than left-wing liberal ideologies to reducing uncertainty, and thus the extent to which there is an asymmetrical political shift to the right in times of societal uncertainty. Some chapters argue that because conservative ideologies and groups tend to be more authoritarian, stasis-oriented, and hierarchy-endorsing they have the properties that people seek under uncertainty. Other chapters argue that any group, whether it is conservative or liberal, that has such attributes will be attractive to those who feel they are a good fit to the group—thus under uncertainty conservatives will shift to the right and liberals to the left. People who are politically entirely unaffiliated will probably find the right more attractive than the left, but only to the extent that the right has an ideology that is more rigidly orthodox and consensual and a group structure that is more crystallized and hierarchical than the left. Further conceptual clarification and empirical research are clearly needed here.

The difficult nature of the notion of extremism also surfaces across the chapters, reflecting the fact that “extremism” is a problematic construct—what constitutes extremism, how does one define extremism, and from whose perspective? The majority of our chapters view extremism as socially and personally harmful because it relates to social exclusion, maladaptive ideological belief systems, dysfunctionally hierarchical and rigid group structure, and individual and collective violence; extremism is a social problem in urgent need of resolution. In
keeping with the applied nature of the conference a number of our chapters outline potential intervention strategies to combat or protect against destructive extremist behaviors.

We would be remiss however if we did not also note that a final theme within the book is that the extreme behavior of individuals and groups can be a potent force for social change—that extremism can create uncertainty and thus make individuals and groups reconsider their beliefs and practices and then change them. While most chapters focus on the negatives of uncertainty and extremism, some chapters focus on positives. Specifically the conditions under which people can resist extremist group norms and “break free” to favor oppressed out-groups or in-group minorities, and the way in which extreme individuals and minorities can produce social change by leading people to question and then change their beliefs, practices, and identities.

Our goal in this book has been to ask whether uncertainty might psychologically cause extremism. The answer to this question is a resounding “yes.” The key questions now revolve around what types of uncertainty are most implicated, what forms extremism may take, and what the precise psychological process is that transforms uncertainty into extremism. We have some answers but there are still some loose ends, some contradictions, and some unanswered questions. This is the first book to systematically integrate and explore the burgeoning diversity of social psychological perspectives on the uncertainty–extremism relationship. Future research will build on these foundations to provide a reliable scientific basis for effective policy development and practical interventions—interventions aimed at protecting against uncertainty that might translate into harmful extremism, or aimed at steering resolution of uncertainty in constructive directions.

Michael Hogg and Danielle Blaylock
Los Angeles and Belfast
January 2011
Part I

Theories and Concepts