**Disloyal, deluded, dangerous: how supporters of violence or separatism discredit their political opponents**

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**Abstract**

Where there is conflict between groups, members argue with each other over the correct course of action. While some advocate increased violence or separation between the groups, others argue for peace, tolerance or interdependence. Advocates of violence or separation engage in discursive strategies to discredit these in-group opponents, in which they claim to represent the true interests and spirit of the group while their opponents are dismissed are selfish, disloyal, subservient, weak or ignorant. Methods of discrediting opponents act as a form of social pressure, defining a set of social norms, punishing dissenters, and warning others against publicly adopting opposing positions. This chapter examines the discursive practices used to discredit opponents in a range of current and historical conflict situations. A distinction will be drawn between ‘mild’ and ‘strong’ discrediting practices.

**Introduction**

Naturally the common people don’t want war… But after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship…. …the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country. (Herman Goering, April 18, 1946, in Gilbert, 1947, p 278-9)

Where there is debate over a group’s relations with other groups, members argue with each other over the correct course of action. Some claim that violence or separation is the best strategy, while others argue for peace, negotiation and interdependence. In these disputes, we would expect to find that issues of identity come to the fore, and there has been much research into the discursive construction of the out-group, the in-group, and the intergroup context (e.g. Bar-Tal et al, 2010; Billig, 1995; Finlay, 2017; Hodges, 2013; Lazar & Lazar, 2004; Oddo, 2011; Reicher, Haslam & Rath, 2008). However, these often bitter and fierce debates also involve representations of the identities of, and divisions between, in-group members. Central to these internal disputes are claims about who is the most loyal and authentic group member, who is entitled to speak for the group, and who perceives the intergroup situation most accurately. In this chapter, I will examine how this is done by those advocating violence and/or separation ( ‘hawks’, ‘separatists’, ‘extremists’, the far right, nationalists and so on), and how this involves a range ofrepresentations designed to discreditdiscredit in-group opponents (e.g. ‘moderates’, ‘doves’, ‘peaceniks’, human rights activists, multiculturalists etc). These representations fulfill a number of functions: they delegitimize in-group opponents and negate their rights to speak on behalf of the group, they convey and enforce political norms, and they act as a form of social pressure against opposition and dissent. This chapter will examine the discursive practices used to discredit opponents in a range of current and historical conflict situations.

Two fundamental understandings underlieie this chapter. Thee first is that group relations are made up of myriad social practices, structures and beliefs, and that if we are to contribute something that will help tackle conflict, we need to understand what these are and how they work. Following Galtung’s (1969) distinction between direct and structural violence, social practices that contribute to intergroup conflict include direct acts of violence, subjugation, discrimination and separation as well as all the social processes that support these practices, and which occur in meetings, education, entertainment, offices, the legal system, police forces, the military, politics, and journalism, just to name a few. Linguistic practices that encourage and sustain conflict and inequality are central to many of these processes and practices.

The second understanding is that groups are not homogenous: they are made up of people and organisations that take up different stances and argue over them. With regards to intergroup relations, people who share the same group identity argue over the nature of the intergroup context, the characteristics of ‘them’ and ‘us’, what the best course of action is to create a better future, who has the right to speak for the group, and so on. For example, there is disagreement about norms concerning contact with non-Muslims among UK Muslims with different political, theological and cultural backgrounds (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2006), and research on schisms in other religious and political groups has shown how members of each sub-group claim their own faction represents the true essence of the group (Sani & Reicher, 1998; 2000).

These arguments often involve conflicting claims about identity. As Reicher, Hopkins and Condor (1997) point out, people define groups and identities in such a way as to legitimate their own political projects, and political argument often involves depictions of opponents as unrepresentative of the group (e.g. Bar Tal, 1997; Finlay, 2005; 2007; 2014; Leudar, Marsland & Nekvapil, 2004; Rapley, 1998; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996; 2001; Rooyackers & Verkuyten, 2011; Wood & Finlay, 2008; Yildiz & Verkutyen, 2012). As Hopkins et al (2006, p.55) put it, “Reconstructions of identity ..are produced to explain situations and organize actions .... Particular identity constructions arise to counter alternative definitions ..”

Debates over whether to fight or negotiate, whether to form alliances or remain separate, or whether one group has unfair advantages over another are found in many different political and social contexts, and their content and form differs as a result. They happen in situations where members of one group who occupy a defined territory want to form a separate nation state or join an existing one; where a violent minority who do not have political power claim to be fighting on behalf of a much larger group against groups they define as enemies; where the far right campaign against immigrants, asylum-seekers, and other minority groups; where governments overtly persecute and subjugate minorities; where there is civil or inter-state war; and where a nation wishes to join or withdraw from a multi-nation union.

**Silencing opponents**

Efforts to suppress the voice of those advocating peace, co-existence or further integration with other groups can take many forms. In totalitarian regimes, the law and threat of imprisonment or death is often used. In Nazi Germany, those who associated with Jews, had relations with Poles, or opposed racial policy could be publicly pilloried, imprisoned under the Enabling Act, thrown into concentration camps, or executed. A number of terms were used to refer to such people and their offences such as ‘rassenschende’ (race defilement), ‘judenknechte’ (slave to the Jews) and ‘judenfruende’ (friend of the Jews) (Burleigh & Wipperman, 1991), and historical research shows that the Gestapo relied on denunciations from the general public to help them enforce racial policy (Gellately, 1990). Whites who protested against the apartheid regime in South Africa were often arrested and interrogated, and in many countries we have seen journalists imprisoned for exposing injustice or speaking out against government policy. When militias, killing squads or violent insurgents are operating in a country, those who object become targets themselves. For example, in Rwanda, Hutus who tried to aid the Tutsis during the genocide of 1994 were likely to be slaughtered themselves by the Interahamwe (Berkeley, 2001).

Silencing opponents is also involved in the maintenance of sectarian segregation. Shirlow (2003), writing on the Northern Ireland conflict, concludes that ‘the violent, cultural and political acts which aid the reproduction of segregation should not be read as being supported by all residents of segregated communities … The fear of entering areas dominated by the ‘other’ ethnosectarian group can be influenced by threats, both imagined and real, that are set against people by members of their ‘own’ community.’ (p. 76). In his study, interviews with residents of two neighbouring areas of Belfast, Ardoyne (Protestant/Unionist) and Upper Ardoyne (Catholic/Republican), revealed two approaches to mixing with the other group. Sectarians were more likely to be adults of working age. They would avoid going into the neighbouring area or using its shops and community facilities, tended to talk about members of the other group in negative terms, and represented their own community as victimised. They also tended to view those who had cross-group contacts as disloyal.

Non-sectarians, who were more likely to be older and to have had cross-community friends and relatives before the start of the Troubles, rejected segregation. They were more likely to use facilities in the neighbouring area and maintain social relations and activities with those in the other group, and were more likely to acknowledge that both groups shared blame for violence. However, they were also more likely to suffer physical attacks from, or be berated by, members of their own community due to their non-sectarian or anti-paramilitary attitudes. Non-sectarians reported being distrusted to such an extent that they felt they had to hide their cross-group contacts and their political views from other members of their own community unless they knew they could trust them. Shirlow claimed that these social pressures effectively silenced those voices who could have challenged ethno-sectarian discourses.

In many contexts, exerting pressure on opposing voices occurs without the threat of violence, and here the danger to dissenters is more about public shaming, ridicule, or social ostracism. However, in all these situations advocates of violence or separation use forms of discourse that discredit their in-group opponents, in which they claim to represent the true interests and spirit of the group while their opponents are dismissed ass selfish, disloyal, subservient, evil, weak or ignorant.

**Discrediting statements: form and function**

Discrediting statements have a range of functions which are more or less explicit. They are an attempt to claim what the normative beliefs, behaviours and identifications of group members are or should be. At the same time, they imply the speaker/writer is a loyal, authentic member of the group who sees the intergroup situation and the interests of the group most clearly, while the target who is discredited should not be listened to, has no right to speak for the group, and should either change their position, keep quiet, or have some punitive actions applied to them. For the audience, the discrediting statement acts as an implicit warning that this is how they will be talked about or seen if they were to adopt a similar position.

In terms of form, several distinctions can be drawn. Characterizing opponents as people whose opinions should not be trusted or who are dangerous involvesdepictions designed to discredittheir identities using social categorizations, personality traits, emotions and psychological complexes and motivations. Often social-psychological explanations are also given of why these people have such ‘wrong-headed’ opinions. That is, the opponents are not just wrong but they are wrong for a reason which is further discrediting. They are also discredited through descriptions of their actions, which might imply ideas of sabotage, violence or subservience to outsiders. A second distinction will be drawn in this chapter between ‘strong’ (blaming, accusing, threatening) and ‘mild’ (forgiving, persuading, non-blaming) discounting practices.

**Analytic approach**

My approach to the examples here is broadly based on the types of discursive and rhetorical analysis mainly developed in Social Psychology (e.g. Billig, 1987; 1995; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; van Dijk, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). That is, I am interested in how these accounts are put together, the wider sets of meanings and ideas they draw on, and the functions relevant to group relations which are served bythese types of discourse. While each of the extracts could have been analysed in more detail, my aim is only to make analytic points directly relevant to how opponents are discredited in these contexts, and to illustrate variations across a range of contexts where intergroup relations are contested.

The examples below come from situations in which intergroup relations are at issue. They were selected principally to illustrate how discrediting is carried out in situations of conflict. While some come from a full analysis of particular data-sets (e.g. the PIR and Jewish self-hate examples) others were collected in the course of reading historical materials and news media. There is no implication that the contexts drawn on below are morally or historically comparable. In cases such as Scottish independence, for example, there is no implication that either side holds the moral high ground. However, the problem the speaker/writer faces is basically the same: how to account for opposing views in such a way as to present them and their proponents as wrong, while at the same time presenting the speaker as a more trustworthy representative of the group. We will start by looking at several examples of milder discrediting practices.

**Mildly discrediting accounts and descriptions of opponents**

In 2014 there was a referendum in Scotland about whether the country should become an independent nation (‘Yes’) or remain part of the UK (‘No’). While the main UK parties supported remaining in the Union, the Scottish National Party (SNP) argued for independence, and public opinion remained fairly evenly split in the run up to the referendum. SNP discourse contained explanations as to why some Scottish people were in favour of the Union, and why they were wrong in this belief[[1]](#footnote-2). Since this was not a violent situation and the SNP wanted to persuade voters to turn away from the ‘No’ camp, they had to provide these accounts in ways that did not insult or threaten those who disagreed with them, but still functioned to discount the unionist position. For example, in 2010 the then leader of the SNP, Alex Salmond, said in his SNP conference speech:

Delegates – one of our party founders Robert Cunningham Graeme once said: "The problem for Scotland is not the English who are a great and noble people. The problem for Scotland is those Scots who are born without imagination.” In one sense, he was wrong. People are not born without imagination – it is drummed out of them – often by political parties, who have a vested interest in lowering the expectations of the people. (Salmond, 2010)

The extract begins with a quote from a party founder. By using this, Salmond immediately does some rhetorical work. Billig (1987) points out that when analysing what people say we often need to understand how their accounts are put together to resist alternative versions. In this case, the relevant context is that the SNP are often accused by opponents of being driven by anti-English sentiment. Salmond wards this off by praising the English – they are ‘a great and noble people’. The next part of the quote accuses Scottish opponents of independence of lacking imagination. Since it ists important not to insult those you want to persuade to vote for you, Salmond immediately disagrees. He modifies Graeme’s statement by saying a lack of imagination is not their own fault, but is ‘drummed out of them - often by political parties’. The function of this section of his speech is that it allows him to portray the opposition as wrong due to a lack of imagination and low expectations. However, it is not Scottish voters who are to blame, but political parties with vested interests. He reinforces this later in the speech:

Just think of it. Labour, the party which brought the country to its financial knees, unites with the Tories, the party of omnishambles, to tell Scotland that we are uniquely incapable as a nation. (Salmond, 2012)

Again, blame for the ‘No’ position is not placed on Scottish voters, but the two main UK political parties. What we also see here is the ‘No’ position portrayed as the belief that ‘we are uniquely incapable as a nation.’ Scottish nationhood (whether or not associated with a nation-state) is asserted as a given in this formulation, as is the idea that all other nations are capable. Since it is only Scotland that these parties think is incapable, the ‘No’ position is an insult to the Scottish people. Both of these constructions, that it is politicians driving the ‘No’ camp, and that they believe Scotland is incapable, are also found in a 2012 conference party speech by Nicola Sturgeon, the deputy leader at the time:

Friends, there is no country in the world - big or small - that is guaranteed success. But the combination of our natural resources and the skills and intelligence of our people make us just as capable as any other nation (…) That Scotland could thrive as an independent nation is not, never has been, never should be in doubt. And shame on any politician who ever suggests that it is. (Sturgeon, 2012)

We can also find these milder types of discrediting accounts in violent, totalitarian contexts. The following is from a propaganda article written by Goebbels in 1941 for the Nazi magazine Das Reich::

The Jews (..) have recently found a new trick. They knew the good-natured German Michel in us, always ready to shed a sentimental tear for the injustice done to them. (..) The Jews send out the pitiable. They may confuse some harmless souls for a while, but not us. We know exactly what the situation is. (..) The Jews are a parasitic race that feeds like a foul fungus on the cultures of healthy but ignorant peoples. (Goebbels, 1941)

This extract attempts to account for the behaviour of non-Jewish Germans who supported the Jews. They are presented in positive terms as ‘good-natured’, ‘sentimental’ and ‘harmless’, but also as easily fooled when the Jews ‘send out the pitiable’. It is initially their good nature, and then their ignorance, which makes them confused. However, the Nazis are presented as seeing through this ploy: ‘We know exactly what the situation is.’ Of course, much more aggressive denunciations were also used against those who rejected Nazi racial policy, and this was often accompanied by imprisonment, brutality and execution.

**Strongly discrediting accounts and descriptions of opponents**

More strongly discrediting accounts and descriptions are those in which opponents are disparaged and their arguments discounted using moral condemnation, pejorative character descriptions, and references to war and violence which impute evil and destructive intentions. Examples of this can be found in both right-wing politics and in violent conflicts.

**Strongly discrediting accounts and descriptions of opponents in right-wing political discourse.**

Aggressive and belittling discourse is often used by those on the far-right to attack their liberal opponents (Copsey, 2004; Finlay, 2007). The British National Party (BNP) is a political party which in 2005 claimed on its website ‘exists to secure a future for the indigenous peoples of these islands in the North Atlantic which have been our homeland for a millennia’. The extract below comes from an article on its website (www.bnp.org.uk) shortly after the London tube and bus bombings which killed 52 people in 2005 (see Wood & Finlay, 2008, for a more comprehensive analysis). The article, by Lee Barnes (then Legal Director of the BNP and writer of the Brimstone column on the website), argues that Muslims pose a threat to Britain because there is a programme to infiltrate non-Muslim societies and destroy them from within. The article warns that it is not just Muslims who are dangerous to British society, but all those who support multiculturalism::

The Multi-Cultural nightmare of Britain is the sea in which the terrorist can swim. The era of the liberal Consensus is over. The time when deluded and apathetic liberals, New Left fascists, tolerance freaks and diversity nazis, sycophantic vicars and various other white witless female version of Charles Dickens Mrs Jellyby were listened to is over. They should all now be despised for the utter idiots they all are and for the danger they have placed us all in. (Barnes, 2005)

The extract starts by declaring that the terrorist attacks in London mean that the political consensus on multiculturalism has changed. Those who promote multiculturalism and liberal values are dismissed with a range of pejorative terms: deluded and apathetic liberals, New Left fascists, tolerance freaks and diversity nazis, sycophantic vicars, white witless female version of Mrs Jellyby. Each of these identities is constructed negatively either by the use of adjectives (e.g. deluded, witless, sycophantic) or categorical nouns with negative connotations (e.g. fascists, Nazis, freaks, idiots). Mrs Jellyby is a fictional character in the novel ‘Bleak House’ (Charles Dickens) whose philanthropic concern for Africa led to a neglect of herself and her family. It is interesting that these attacks on liberals present them as both strong and weak. Describing those who speak up for multiculturalism as fascists depicts them as authoritarians, and is a common way that extreme-right parties counter accusations of fascism leveled against themselves (Copsey, 2004). Presenting them as deluded, witless, utter idiots and sycophantic presents them as ignorant and weakly subservient to others. Either way, these types of people are blamed for the terrorist attacks. The ways in which supporters of multiculturalism are discredited make the proposed actions towards them logical – they should ‘be despised’ and should not be listened to.

More recent examples from mainstream right-wing discourse suggest that political opponents are deliberately and/or violently threatening “the people”. One case comes from political debate in the UK over whether to remain in or leave the European Union in 2016. During the referendum campaign, those arguing for leaving the EU (‘Brexiters’) claimed that this would allow the UK to ‘take back control’ and reclaim its lost sovereignty and independence. Leave voters thus saw themselves as more patriotic than ‘remain’ voters (‘Remainers’). After the UK voted by a narrow majority to leave in a referendum, there were several legal challenges asserting that, for constitutional reasons, the result of the referendum had to be ratified in Parliament. The popular right-wing newspaper Daily Mail, strongly anti-EU and anti-immigrant, ran two front pages denouncing both the High Court judges and those who supported the legal challenge::



In the first example, those supporting the legal challenge were labeled ‘unpatriotic *Bremoaners* is a play on the terms *Brexiters* and *Remainers,* portraying Remainers as bad losers since they continue to *moan* about leaving after narrowly losing the vote. This is coupled with the adjective ‘unpatriotic’, and then reinforced by describing them as engaging in a ‘plot to subvert the will of the British people’ with the implications of sabotage, treachery, and a failure to respect/love the nation.

In the second example, the High Court judges who ruled in favour of the legal challenge were branded ‘enemies of the people’. Both headlines discredit their targets, but they do it using discourse more appropriate to war than to peace-time political debate. The judges and those mounting the legal challenge are depicted as hostile to the British people and as actively engaged in covert actions against the nation.

US President Trump has used similar discourse in his Twitter attacks. For example, shortly after becoming president, he attacked a range of mainstream news organisations who did not give him positive reviews or support his early attempts to bring in measures against Muslim immigrants:

The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People! (@realDonaldTrump, February 17, 2017).

This notion of an internal enemy is found in other current right-wing political discourse in the USA. The following extracts are from the Chief Executive of the National Rifle Association[[2]](#footnote-3), Wayne LaPierre, in a speech made at the Conservative Political Action (CPA) Conference in February, 2017 (Bump, 2017). The speech as a whole warns of a dangerous and deliberate threat to American people from those who oppose Trump and/or his policies (through street protests, in the media, in Washington, and in the courts), and we see an interesting discursive feature: the use of the term ‘violence’ to cover a range of non-violent opposition. The speech begins by describing protests by the ‘far left’ on Inauguration Day:

They tomahawk beer bottles and rocks at police, putting multiple police in the hospital. They smashed business’ plate-glass windows while customers cowered inside.

This is followed by two alleged examples of violence against Trump supporters, one in which a schoolgirl was beaten up, and one in which a group was attacked with eggs and had their hats stolen. These examples are used to make the claim:

Right now, we are facing a gathering of forces that are willing to use violence against us. Think about it. The leftist movement in this country is enraged. Among them and behind them are some of the most radical political elements there are. Anarchists, Marxists, communists and the whole rest of the left-wing Socialist brigade. Many of these people hate everything America stands for. Democracy. Free-market capitalism. Representative government. Individual freedom. They want to tear down our system and replace it with their collectivist, top-down, global government-knows-best utopia.

Here we have Trump’s opponents described as a collective ‘leftist movement’, which is discredited by the claim that ‘behind them’ (i.e. controlling them) are ‘some of the most radical political elements there are’. This is followed by a list of category labels historically seen as enemies of the country (anarchists, Marxists, communists), which are explicitly characterized as hating fundamental American political values (democracy, capitalism, representative government) and wanting to tear down the system. The discourse takes an interesting form: while not claiming all those on the left want to do those things, the quote implies that those directing it do. The danger posed by those opposing Trump is implied in another way later on:

So, if you are a member of the leftist media or a soldier for the violent left, a violent criminal, a drug cartel gang member or would-be terrorist, hear this: You’re not going to win and you will not defeat us.

Here, LaPierre discredits Trump’s opponents by grouping the ‘leftist media’ along with the ‘violent left’, drug cartels and criminals, and suggesting this collectivity wants to defeat ‘us’. This construction implies the media is a threat on the level of, or morally associated with, these other actors. The use of the term ‘violent left’ is usefully vague. It could either mean elements of the left which protest using violence, or it could simply imply the left are violent, with echoes of the way Trump often uses adjectives to modify the names of his opponents so that every mention of the person becomes an opportunity to discredit them (e.g. lying Ted; crooked Hillary; little Marco; crazy Bernie; low-energy Jeb; failing @nytimes [ABC News, 2016]).

It becomes apparent that LaPierre is applying the term ‘violent’ to Trump opponents in general later in his speech. The media is referred to as ‘leftist’ in the extract above, a description justified by his claim elsewhere in the speech that the ‘national media machine’ is ‘biased almost entirely one-way’. When talking about media criticism of Trump, he also discredits it through constructions of hostile activity, saying ‘the leftist media is responsible for blowing the winds of violence.’ Later in the speech, he says ‘our country is under siege from a media carpet-bombing campaign’ aimed at ‘maliciously destroying the Trump presidency’. La Pierre also broadens the concept of violence to include legal challenges to Trump’s executive order 13769 which tried to ban people from 7 Muslim countries from entering the USA for 90 days:

The left’s violence against America has taken many forms. For example, left-wing judicial activism can be a form of violence against our constitutional system. Look at judicial efforts to block President Trump’s executive order to take a longer look at people coming from countries that sponsor terrorism.

..they might as well throw a Molotov cocktail at the U.S. Constitution. They do violence to the Constitution’s separation of powers and the U.S. code. And they do violence to the checks and balances that keep government under control.

Here the victim of the left’s violence is not the people, but the Constitution. The idea of violent revolution and threat is reinforced by repetition of the word ‘violence’ four times in these two extracts, and by the comparison of the legal challenge to throwing a ‘Molotov cocktail’. The prejudicial aspects of Trump’s executive order banning residents of seven Muslim countries from entry is also minimized by the lack of detail: it is described as simply designed to ‘take a longer look at people coming from countries that sponsor terrorism.’ Despite the fact that the order overwhelmingly targets Muslims, there is no mention of Muslims (they are simply referred to as ‘people’).

These discursive constructions use references to violence and war actions (carpet-bombing, under siege, destroying, throwing Molotov cocktails) in order to present mainstream media criticism and non-violent legal opposition to Trump’s policies as essentially violent. Opposition in all arenas has become simply an expression of ‘the violent left’, allowing for the following rallying cry to Trump supporters:

We’ll fight the violent left on the airwaves, the Internet, and on TV. We’ll fight the violent left in Congress and in the Washington Bureaucracy.

Later in the speech, the ‘violent left’ becomes terrorist:

Make no mistake, if the violent left brings their terror to our communities, our neighborhoods or into our homes, they will be met with the resolve and the strength and the full force of American freedom in the hands of the American people, and we will win because we are the majority in this country.

In the two extracts above, we see La Pierre talk about ‘we’ (see Billig, 1995, for discussion of the construction of national communities using pronouns), which seems to refer at the same time both to the listening audience (Trump supporters/the NRA/the CPA attendees) and the American people more generally. Not only is the left attacking ‘our’ communities and homes, but ‘we’ will win because ‘we are the majority in this country’. Elsewhere, ‘we’ refers to those who support the politics of the NRA and the CPA, and who are presented as the saviours of America:

We’re the nation’s largest gathering of lawful, peaceful, right-thinking people who are absolutely determined to live our lives without fear. (…) We stand ready and resolved to defend our freedom and secure our safety against any enemy.

It is clear that it is LaPierre and his audience who truly represent America in these extracts, both as under threat from the ‘violent left’ and as those who will fight against them. At the same time, the left (including the liberal media and the courts) is discredited by numerous claims that it is a violent danger to both the principles of the nation (freedom, democracy) and the safety of its people. The function of such constructions is to present opposition to Trump as not emanating from reasonable consideration of the issues by ordinary Americans, but rather as the expression of a violent hatred of America, its principles and its people. This is achieved through a loose use of the term ‘violent’ to refer to a range of non-violent political, media and legal activities and institutions, through the conflation of all opposition under the noun phrase ‘violent left’, and through grouping the opposition with criminals and terrorist. What is striking about this type of talk is that it is a discourse of war rather than one of peaceful, reasoned democratic argument. It is all about violence.

**Strongly discrediting accounts and descriptions of opponents in violent conflicts.**

So far we have seen examples of the ways people argue against fellow group members through depictions of them in various negative ways – as lacking confidence, being ignorant and easily fooled, being subservient, or more severely as being authoritarian, hating the nation and its principles, and engaging in sabotage. This section will examine some ways this is done in violent conflicts.

This first example comes from the Middle Eastern conflict, where there are

great debates among Jews across the world over the policies of the Israeli government towards the Palestinians. In these debates, we often find arguments over who best understands the conflict, what the best strategy is, what the ultimate goals should be for the land, and who therefore has the right to represent the Jewish people. The notion of ‘self-hate’ is often used in hawkish Zionist discourse to discredit Jews who speak up for the plight of Palestinians and criticize the actions of the Israeli government (Finlay 2005). The notion of Jewish self-hatred is a social psychological one, where it is claimed that living in anti-Semitic cultures can lead Jews to internalize anti-Semitism and thus hate their own identity and cultural heritage. It is useful strategically to level at Jewish opponents of Israeli government policy because it declares that their political views are due to a hatred of Jews, the Jewish state and Jewish culture, rather than due to a set of moral principles or historical/political understandings. For example, in 1992 Ariel Sharon, the defence minister during the 1982 massacre of Palestinian civilians at Sabra and Shatilla and later the prime minister, wrote a piece in the Jerusalem Post describing the Jewish left-wing who criticized the invasion of Lebanon as ‘consumed by self-hate and the tendency to kowtow to the enemy, and the Arab nationalist parties’. In a later article in the same paper, he criticized the then Labour government for their participation in the Oslo peace process and for accepting the idea of an independent Palestinian Authority:

But history marches on. Terrible self-hate engulfs us. The terrorist organization’s flag is unfurled in Tel Aviv’s Malchei Yisrael Square. We plead with Arafat by phone, dispatch couriers post-haste. Our leaders talk to Arafat about disarming Jews and dismantling Jewish settlements. (Sharon, 1994)

The notion of self-hate is powerful. The concept is well-known in Jewish narratives about history and identity, and is laden with negative meanings about authenticity, loyalty and psychological health, and it is all the more powerful in the context of a long-term violent conflict which has taken many lives (for further examples of its use in discrediting the Jewish peace movement see Finlay, 2005; 2007).

Other forms of discrediting discourse can be seen in the analysis of email communications sent out by the Party for Islamic Renewal, a UK-based Al-Qaeda-supporting group (see Finlay, 2014 for a full analysis). The emails, sent to the organisation’s distribution list, contained mainly news articles and commentaries on current events. Overall, they were anti-Western, anti-Semitic, against the rulers of Muslim countries and also against Western involvement in those countries. A number of emails clearly supported Al Qaeda and its attacks. So-called ‘moderate’ Muslims, who either condemned terrorist attacks, worked with the UK government, or joined with non-Muslims in political organisations, were subject to a great deal of derogatory and discrediting commentary in the emails. They were described as dangerous for supporting governments engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and therefore as contributing to the deaths of Muslims. A number of discrediting explanations for their behavior were given. These included that they were doing it for financial and personal gain, they were unmanly, weak and psychologically subservient to former colonial rulers, and that they were apostates (i.e. had chosen to leave Islam and thus the Muslim community). The following extract refers to a member of the Muslim Council of Britain who was also chair of a government taskforce on extremism, and who allegedly said that Muslims could fight in the British forces::

Numerous verses in the Quran have clearly stated that the believers are prohibited from allying with the non-Muslims and most definitely if the alliance is against fellow Muslims (..) I would sincerely advise everyone to treat this ‘man’ as if ‘he’ is a belligerent apostate! I would not pray behind ‘him’ nor would I permit any Muslim female to marry him. (..) I would strongly advise his wife to leave the joint home because apostasy annuls marriage automatically.

The extract begins by using evidence from the Quran (‘numerous verses’) as the basis for the ensuing judgment that, by breaking Quranic injunctions on allying with non-Muslims, the man is an apostate. We also see his manhood questioned with the use of quotation marks around ‘man’, ‘‘he’ and ‘‘him’. The function of this is clearly to discredit him by both questioning his masculinity and suggesting he is no longer a Muslim and therefore has no right to speak on behalf of Muslims. The action that follows this is clearly stated – other Muslims should shun him and his wife should leave him.

Moderate Muslims are also accused of feeling inferior and seeking validation from non-Muslims. The next two extracts come from emails that attack Muslims who joined the Respect Party, a political party established by George Galloway (an ex-Labour MP) and which campaigned against the Iraq war and for Muslim rights. The party was an alliance of Muslims and non-Muslims, and targeted constituency seats in areas with large Muslim populations. In the first extract, the ‘he’ refers to George Galloway:

He’s figured that the British Muslims are so mentally colonised from the days of the old British Empire that if they see a white man showing sympathy for them then they’ll be flocking to him.

Yet we see self-appointed moderate Muslims nuzzling his Kafir backside for validation by a white man! That sums up these eunuchs of the Ummah.

In the first extract, the writer discredits moderates by drawing on historical examples. Other writers have shown how history (and ‘serial connectedness’ – Condor, 1996) is often used in debates about identity and political action (Condor, 2006; Hopkins et al, 2003; McKinlay, McVittie & Sambaraju, 2011). In this data set, the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the UK’s history of racism and colonialism were often used to discredit opponents. In a similar type of account to that of Jewish self-hatred, the two extracts above suggest that domination by the British (historically and through being in a minority in Britain) has led to moderates being ‘mentally colonised’ and suffering from an ‘inferiority complex’. This social psychological explanation, that they are desparate for approval from non-Muslims, is used to explain why they work with non-Muslims. Other explanations, for example that they share common values or aspirations for peaceful relations between groups, areare not considered.

Another way of discrediting ‘moderates’ was to suggest they were only engaging with non-Muslims for personal gain. This writer characterizes Muslims who participate in a government taskforce on extremism as “Opportunist Muslim Parliamentarians” who

… use the task force to promote themselves as Blair loyalists, hence working their way up the ladder at the expense of British Muslims. There will be plenty of work for consultants and Muslims seeking to establish their careers, and places on ‘influential’ committees.

Here we see them described as working against the interests of British Muslims and supporting the prime-minister Tony Blair in order to further their own careers (‘working their way up the ladder’ and gaining ‘places on ‘influential’ committees’.

**Conclusion**

I’ve used examples from a range of political contexts to illustrate how those arguing for violence against, separation from, or distrust of other groups respond to a common problem: how to persuade fellow group members that they represent the group and its interests, and that those who argue for peace, an end to persecution, co-operation or unity across boundaries should not be listened to. They do this in a variety of ways which can loosely be categorised as mildly to strongly discrediting accounts and descriptions.

Mildly discrediting accounts and descriptions suggest that opponents are mistaken but not through their own fault. They have been misinformed or manipulated, and they are too trusting or good-natured. These types of discourses do not cast the opponent out of the group, do not call for penalties against them, and leave the way open that they might change their minds.

Strongly discrediting descriptions are more blaming and punitive. They take many forms (and may include milder explanatory accounts such as being ‘mentally colonized’ by a dominant out-group), but all suggest opponents are an internal enemy who must be fought: they hate their own kind and its values due to a warped political orientation; they are selfishly pursuing their own interests at the expense of the group; they are psychologically weak and subservient to powerful outsiders; or they are rejecting their faith. Discrediting statements are constructed through derogatory and threatening representations of social categories, psychological traits and complexes, as well as activities. These types of derogatory characterizations are a warning to others about how they might be seen if they adopt similar positions. They also allow for more severe actions to be taken towards opponents, from being shunned and isolated, being silenced in political debate, to being imprisoned, attacked or killed. Indeed, this type of discourse is often aggressive in ways that are reminiscent of the hostile ways the same speakers and commentators represent outgroups.

One final point can be made with respect to the construction of the intergroup context in situations of conflict or separation. It is well recognized that those arguing for separation from, or hostility towards, a national, ethnic or religious outgroup construct the other as presenting some level of threat to the ingroup. But here we see a second, finer level of intergroup context asserted *within* the ingroup – that of good, authentic and loyal members who have a right to speak for the group, as opposed to those treacherous, ignorant or selfish members who do not. When we try to understand the discursive practices that contribute to conflict, then, we must recognize that constructions of the intergroup context occurs at both levels, one inside the supposed ‘ingroup’ and one involving the more obvious ingroup/outgroup comparison.

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1. Thanks to Ruaridh McDermott for finding these three SNP extracts [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. At the time of writing, the NRA website claimed nearly 5 million members in the U.S.A., although this figure is disputed. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)