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**Cycles of construing in radicalization and deradicalization:
a study of Salafist Muslims**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores radicalization and deradicalization by considering the experiences of six young Tunisian people who had become Salafist Muslims. Their responses to narrative interviews and repertory grid technique are considered from a personal construct perspective, revealing processes of construing and reconstructing, as well as relevant aspects of the structure and content of their construct systems. In two cases, their journeys involved not only radicalization but self-deradicalization, and their experiences are drawn upon to consider implications for deradicalization.

The “first principle” of George Kelly, the originator of personal construct theory, was that “if you do not know what is wrong with a person, ask him; he may tell you” (Kelly, 1955, pp. 322-323). He therefore advocated a credulous attitude, in which the other person’s view of the world is taken seriously and at face value, and an attempt is made to see the world through their eyes. Similar advice has been provided by Ehud Sprinzak in relation to the understanding of extremist views and actions in that he reportedly remarked that “the best way to find out what leads people along the path of extremism, what leads people to be willing to kill in the name of their cause, is – to ask them!” (Post, Sprinzak, & Denny, 2003, p. 171). One such extremist person is Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in the cause of countering “cultural Marxism” and “multiculturalism,” and whose beliefs and actions were considered from a personal construct theory perspective by Winter and Tschudi (2015) in one of a series of attempts to apply a credulous approach to people who have engaged in extreme violence (Reed et al., 2014; Winter, 2006, 2007, 2016a; Winter et al., 2007, 2016). Analysis of an interview conducted by Breivik with himself, similar to a self-characterization (a method developed by Kelly (1955) in which the individual writes an autobiographical character sketch in the third person), indicated that he had experienced numerous invalidations of his construing in his early life, but that the development of his radical beliefs allowed him to reconstrue himself as a “Perfect Knight” (Berwick, 2011, p. 1435).

Similar processes to those observed in Breivik may operate in other individuals who become radicalized. Although previous research has failed to identify a profile of such individuals in terms, for example, of psychopathology, personality, or demographic characteristics (Horgan, 2003; McGilloway, Ghosh, & Bhui, 2015; Silke, 2008), there is some consensus that a predisposing factor to radicalization is a state of uncertainty (Hogg, 2012; Klein & Kruglanski, 2013). In such a state, and perhaps prompted by situations that act as “transformative triggers” (Wilner & Dubouloz, 2010), the development of radical beliefs

and identification with a radical group, which defines itself by contrast with other groups, may provide a more certain view of the self and the world. Acting upon radical beliefs, including violent action, may be a further step in the individual's "quest for significance" (Kruglanski et al., 2009; Webber et al., 2017).

These various features of the process of radicalization can be reframed in the terms of personal construct theory, which asserts that people are primarily concerned with anticipating, and giving meaning to, their worlds, and do this by developing hierarchically organized systems of bipolar personal constructs. Kelly (1955) viewed construing as a cyclical process, central to which is the Experience Cycle, in which the person makes, and invests him/herself in, an anticipation, encounters events, finds his or her anticipation to be either validated or invalidated (confirmed or disconfirmed), and, if the latter, revises his or her construing (Kelly, 1970). Another cyclical process of reconstruing is the Creativity Cycle, in which the person's constructions become looser, or more fluid, before tightening again, becoming more precise and therefore more easily testable. A cycle that is involved in decision-making is the Circumspection-Preemption-Control Cycle, in which (albeit not necessarily in a very deliberate manner) the various constructs involved in a decision are considered, the most superordinate construct is identified, and one of the poles of this construct is chosen. The option taken in the individual's choice is that which is anticipated to have the greatest potential for elaboration of his or her construct system. Finally, there may be a cyclical process involving oscillation between dilation, in which the person broadens their perceptual field in order to attempt to reorganize it, and constriction, in which the perceptual field is narrowed in an attempt to minimize inconsistencies and conflicts in construing.

Since, in Kelly's (1969, p. 276) view, a person's construct system "gives him identity," the process of reconstruing that is involved in radicalization may be viewed as one

of identity change. As proposed by Winter and Feixas (2018), the personal construct model of radicalization consists of the following stages (the relative importance of which may vary in different individuals):

- i) The individual is likely to have had a history of invalidation of their construing, including episodes of massive invalidation involving core constructs, those by which the person “maintains his identity and existence” (Kelly, 1955, p. 482). The invalidation may not only have occurred in family or other intimate relationships but, as a particular precursor to radicalization, may have involved broader experiences of adversity, social rejection, humiliation, and perceived grievance. It will not only be likely to have caused considerable anxiety, if the person finds that their constructs no longer allow them to anticipate their world, but also threat, defined by Kelly (1955) as the ‘*awareness of imminent comprehensive change in one’s core structures*’ (p. 489, italics in original). If it involved the person appearing to be dislodged from their core role, their characteristic ways of interacting with others, it will also have involved guilt, in Kelly’s (1955) sense of the term.
- ii) The development of radical beliefs, drawing upon available social constructions, leads to a more structured and certain view of the world, usually associated with an extreme negative construction of another group, allowing further definition of the self by contrast with this group. Essentially, the person may be viewed as developing a tightly structured subsystem of constructs concerned with their radical views, thus reducing anxiety by increasing the predictability of the world. Guilt is also reduced as the person conforms to a core role as a member of the radical group.

- iii) The radical constructions are validated by contact with others who share similar views, often coupled with constriction of the person's former social world. The person in effect obtains a new group of "validating agents" (Landfield, 1980) for their constructions, and may progressively delimit their social world to these particular individuals.
- iv) The radical constructions are also "shored up" by hostility in Kelly's (1955) sense of extortion of evidence for them. This may be necessary to maintain the certainty afforded by these constructions in the face of what might otherwise seem an uncertain world (as when members of demonized groups do not behave in an anticipated way).
- v) Acting upon radical beliefs, including violent action, is more likely in those for whom doing so is anticipated to lead to the greatest increment in structure and predictability of their self-construing. Thus, if a significant increase in the anticipated certainty of the future, and perhaps of consistency with the person's core role, is associated with becoming a martyr, the person may be more likely to pursue a violent, and perhaps suicidal, course of action.

The present paper¹ applies the personal construct perspective to the processes of radicalization and deradicalization in young people in Tunisia who had become Salafists, identifying with a branch of Sunni Islam that advocates a return to the practices of the first Muslims. Although Salafists are a heterogeneous group, some of whom ("Salafiyya elmiyya²") reject the use of violence, they have been a particular and indiscriminate target of the anti-terror policies of the post-2014 Tunisian government, which has been viewed as reverting to the oppressive practices of the previous authoritarian, secular regime of Zine El Abidine Ben-Ali, much reviled by Islamists. As a result, some Salafists have adopted a more

pragmatic approach, others have rejected the Salafist doctrine, while yet others have remained or become committed to a path of Jihad³.

The following research questions will be addressed:

- i) What aspects of construing characterize the process of radicalization in Tunisian Salafists?
- ii) What differentiates those who maintain their Salafist beliefs and identity from those who have become deradicalized?

METHOD

Participants

These were six participants from a study of 25 Tunisian Salafists (Muhanna-Matar, 2017) who, in addition to the interview employed in the larger study, were willing to complete a repertory grid (the principal assessment method derived from personal construct theory). Five were male and one female, and their mean age was 26.3 years (range 23 to 30 years). All had a high level of education and two were in stable employment, three were university students, and one was unemployed. They were recruited with the aid of a mediator who had strong links with Salafist leaders and activists, and through snowball sampling (Atkinson & Flint, 2014). Care was taken to build trust with potential participants by, for example, the interviewer, an Arabic speaker with a similar cultural background, participating in public activities of Salafist charity organizations.

Measures

Interview.

Unstructured narrative interviews (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) were conducted, in which each participant was initially asked “Why and how did you become a Salafist and what changes happened throughout your experience of becoming a Salafist?” This was followed by informal conversation focused upon elaborating upon events, perceived reasons for them, and

participants' reactions to them in order to elicit a comprehensive narrative. Participants were interviewed up to four times within a period of one year, each interview lasting between 90 minutes and two hours.

The interviews were audiotaped, and, as in other research using narrative interviews (Winter, 2016b, 2018), the transcripts were viewed in terms of the professional constructs of personal construct theory. As in a previous ethnographic analysis of the interviews of the larger sample from which the participants were derived (Muhanna-Matar, 2017), the interviews will be presented in terms of the phases of radicalization; actualization of a radical Salafist identity; experimentation with this identity; and, where relevant, the choice to self-deradicalize. Quotes from the interviews which have been selected to illustrate each of these phases and relevant processes of construing will be provided.

Repertory Grid.

The repertory grid method used was developed by Winter (2011) for the study of radicalization. The elements were the self before and after becoming Salafist (or in one case the self when a Salafist and the self after becoming an atheist), three Salafists and three non-Salafists whom they knew, their ideal self, and a member of a group with opposing beliefs. Four constructs ("Salafist constructs") were elicited from triads of Salafist elements (by asking for an important way in which two of the elements in each triad were similar and thereby different from the third), four ("non-Salafist constructs") from triads of non-Salafist elements, and two from mixed triads, and elements were rated on a 7-point scale on the constructs.

Idiogrid (Grice, 2002) analysis of the grids allowed the following measures to be derived:

- i) salience (measured by percentage sum of squares, with higher scores indicating that the self element concerned is likely to be construed more extremely) of self as Salafist and non-Salafist;
- ii) salience of other Salafist and non-Salafist elements;
- iii) distance of ideal self from self as Salafist and non-Salafist (high scores indicating construed dissimilarity of the elements concerned and therefore more negative construing of the particular self element);
- iv) average distance of ideal self from other Salafist and non-Salafist elements;
- v) percentage sum of squares accounted for by “Salafist” and “non-Salafist” constructs (the higher the score the more useful are the constructs concerned in discriminating between elements);
- vi) intensity (sum of squared intercorrelations, higher scores indicating that the constructs concerned are more tightly structured) of “Salafist” and “non-Salafist” constructs;
- vii) number of implicative dilemmas (Feixas & Saúl, 2004), in which a desired characteristic is associated with an undesired characteristic, associated with the self as Salafist and non-Salafist.

In addition, principal component analysis of the grids allowed plots of elements in construct space to be produced.

Grids were also analysed by Gridstat (Bell, 2009), allowing derivation of the following measure:

- viii) percentage of conflict (as defined by Bell (2004), another measure of logical inconsistency in construing) associated with self as Salafist and non-Salafist.

These various measures provided an indication of the relative salience, or meaningfulness, of the Salafist and non-Salafist self (measure i); the relative salience, or

meaningfulness, of other Salafist and non-Salafist elements (measure ii); the relative negativity of construing of the Salafist and non-Salafist self (measure iii); the relative negativity of construing of other Salafist and non-Salafist elements (measure iv); the relative usefulness (measure v) and structure (measure vi) of “Salafist” and “non-Salafist” constructs; and the relative dilemmas and conflicts associated with the Salafist and non-Salafist self (measures vii and viii).

RESULTS

The interview and repertory grid results of each participant will be presented in turn, beginning with those who have maintained their Salafist identity and ending with those who have become deradicalized. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants.

Sami

Sami is a 30-year old from a poor background, who completed high school but could not afford university education. He works in a restaurant and is married, with children.

Interview.

Phase One: Radicalization

Sami described how his Salafism is the culmination of a gradual growth in his commitment to Islam, a process in which he was influenced by various Sheikhs:

When I was young, I used to listen to the Tunisian radio and TV news, which portrayed Islamists in Tunisia, and in other Muslim countries as criminals and bloodthirsty. I did not used to judge anyone based on the news...So the seeds of commitment to religion grew slightly when I was young but I did not feed them...Although I was not committed to Islamic precepts, I always believed that I am a good man, but a human is never complete. My commitment to the morality of Islam has grown gradually. I listened to different Sheikhs, through which new ideas have developed in my mind and my behaviors have changed gradually...I was lucky because I was influenced by people who have high

morals in their daily behavior, and have an appealing way of persuasion...The critical moment I had in my life is when I coincidentally met with one of those respectful Sheikhs before the Tunisian uprising. He said to me: "God has been patient with you till you become 21 years old because you are coming from a Muslim family and you have a good spirit. You may need to think about your commitment to God's words now." This man was not harsh in urging me to think of Islam and he communicated with my spirit and my sentiments, not my brain.

He contrasted his Salafist life with his careless and aimless former life:

I was so careless and lived my previous life with no goal. However, I was always experimenting with different styles of life. I never felt happy like how I feel now. Since I became committed to Salafism, I have found a balanced style of life – it's God's will that shapes every aspect of my life.

Phase Two: Actualization of radical Salafist identity.

In the process of constructing his particular Salafist identity, Sami explored various alternative Salafist groups:

Since I was young, I have been respecting sanctities although I went through a period of deviation. By time passing, I was introduced to several Salafist groups, Jihadists and non-Jihadists. I refused to blindly belong to any of them, which all call for establishing an Islamic state controlled by sharia⁴. I decided to detach myself and watch their behaviors till I found the group that meets my expectation of the right understanding and practice of Islam. I found myself with Jebah al-Islah⁵. al-Islah does not believe in Jihad the same way other Jihadist groups do. I thought if we want to reject political involvement, like what Jihadi groups call for, how can we achieve our Islamic goals?...

If I want to get involved in Jihad, it has to only be against Israel. I was confused like too many other Salafists with regard to the meaning of Jihad and its value, but my mind was not convinced with the idea of Jihad against other Muslims.

He also described how his identity has subsequently been elaborated by taking on a major role within his political party, organizing sports events, and being concerned with the revival of Islamic culture:

We can't change our situation by force, or violence, but by changing people's culture, by consciousness.

Phase Three: Experimenting with radical Salafist identity.

His experimentation seemed mainly to involve trying to understand, and to challenge, the views of Jihadist Salafists. His analysis was as follows:

I think young Jihadists take just one part of the Quranic verses and leave others. For example, one Quranic verse says: "O Prophet, fight against the disbelievers and the hypocrites and be harsh upon them. And their refuge is Hell, and wretched is the destination" (sura Tawba, verse 73). But God also says in another verse: "but if they (the disbelievers) cease, Allah is Oft-forgiving, most Merciful" (sura Ma'ida, verse 25). In Islam, we may need to be so decisive in certain situations such as in the case of Palestinians who have been oppressed by the Zionists. Zionists are who we need to go for Jihad against, but not non-Muslims in Europe who do not fight against us and treat us peacefully...The problem with many Jihadists is that they perceive Jihad as a take away meal. They understand the Quran literally. Jabhet al-Islah tries to follow the authentic understanding of the Quran and Hadith and avoid the misinterpretation of Hadiths.

He was able to define his own approach as one of “logic,” by contrast with that of Jihadists:

The problem with extremist Salafists is not related to poverty as most people claim. If poverty leads to extremism, billions of people will become extremists or Jihadists. Rather, it is the lack of logic in understanding Islam and it is only persons who submit to Sheikhs not to God. For example, when they find someone drinking alcohol, they call him kafer⁶ and beat him. What is the benefit of beating him? Violence will not prevent this man to drink alcohol. On the contrary, he may stick more to his behavior. The other option is to gently persuade him.

He described how he has tried to change the attitudes of radical youth:

They really feel embarrassed when they speak to me. They follow their dogmatic Sheikhs and I follow the logic...This is how I can influence radical Salafists by provoking them to actually practise what they talk about.

He contrasts his own approach in this regard with that of the government anti-terror policies:

If the government continues chasing Salafists, and imprisons and tortures them with no strong evidence, many of them will be convinced that they are going in the right direction fighting against the anti-Islam government....Radical Salafists would gradually change their attitudes if they are provided with education that enhances their sense of identity.

Repertory Grid.

As indicated in Table 1, the sums of squares accounted for by the elements in Sami’s grid showed that becoming a Salafist has allowed him to elaborate his self-construing considerably, and that Salafists are more salient to him than non-Salafists. This is also indicated by the more extreme positions of these elements, including the Salafist self, in the plot of elements in construct space (see Figure 1). However, by far the most extremely construed element in the

grid is the one representing opposing views to Sami's, namely George Bush. Element distances indicate that the self after becoming a Salafist is construed as markedly closer to his ideal self than the self before he was a Salafist, and similarly Salafist elements are closer to his ideal self than are non-Salafists. Also, while there is some conflict associated with himself before becoming a Salafist, there is virtually none associated with the self after becoming a Salafist.

Table 1 and Figure 1 near here

Hamdan

Hamdan is a 30-year old university graduate who works in a construction company.

Interview.

Phase One: Radicalization

Hamdan described how from an early age he challenged existing constructions, explored alternatives, and showed leadership qualities:

Even before I became committed to the message of Islamic preaching, I was always searching for tamayuz⁷, rejecting the dominant discourses imposed on me and seeking recognition from others whoever they are. When I was a child, I was always looking to be a leader among my friends, or in the class. From my early age, my friends knew that I have distinguished capacities and leadership characteristics.

It was during his teenage years that his interest in his religion developed:

I had a great curiosity to learn and practise my religion that was degraded by Ben-Ali and his security forces when I was 15 years old. My father was an Ennahda⁸ prisoner and I used to visit him with my mother, who was forced to remove her veil by the police. All my family members were arrested and tortured by the police, including women, with

an accusation of being Islamists...These oppressive events I experienced in my childhood and teenage created a sense of outrage towards the Ben-Ali regime, which urged me to seek more knowledge about my religion from family members and friends.

The experience of being arrested with his friends led him to Salafism:

One day, we were arrested and we were accused of being khalya jihadya⁹. As a reaction, we decided to know what is Jihadism, who are they and what they do? In our early 20s, we were a blank page, knowing nothing about Salafism, or Jihadism, only committed to practising our prayers, but the security forces enlightened us about the existence of Salafism and Jihadism. We were made Salafist by Ben-Ali's police and its tough anti-terrorist regulations. The first time I heard about Salafism was in the interrogation rooms. I was surprised that the interrogator accused me that I am a Salafist, due to the way, or method, of praying I used. I told them: believe me, I first heard this word from you...Thanks for the interrogators who made us aware about how to struggle against their oppression.

He described the choice with which he and his friends were faced:

In the prison, we...were in a situation to choose: either to be submissive to the oppressive regime which was hostile to our religious and national identity, and by this choice we would avoid pain and suffering and gain power; or we resist it by searching for the truth and the appropriate means to resist oppression. We selected the second choice, without necessarily caring about the pain and suffering this choice would entail.

Phase Two: Actualization of radical Salafist identity.

Hamdan described how he elaborated his identity in a way that, unlike some other young Salafists, did not involve Jihad, whereas previously he had seen this as “the only option to unload our anger against the severe torture from the security forces.” As he said,

A few of us thought in a realistic way and decided not to get involved in Jihad, but the majority, who are less equipped with Islamic knowledge and do not have the talent and the skills of communicating with the public, selected the shorter pathway of Jihad - undertaking immediate violent actions to revenge against the enemy of Islam. I understand the point of view of the latter group. These young men were under pressure both from the regime and their families. Parents used to fear arrest and torture against their children and as a result deprived them of having access to computers and internet, and of getting involved in Islamic preaching. Young men were very frustrated and the only option to free themselves from all forms of pressure is to search for Jihad abroad in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was a means of escaping from Tunisia, which lacked the most basic freedoms. Getting involved in Jihad in these countries was not only a religious duty for them. It was a big fantasy of becoming heroic, while they couldn't do it in other ways...Most Jihadists who I know come from a violent background and they are not well educated in Islam, using Jihad as a means to discharge their violence and deviation. Those unskilled and less experienced Jihadists have disadvantaged those who denounced violence and claimed for peaceful Islamic preaching. Yet, security forces did not, and still do not, differentiate between the two groups, and treated us with equal cruelty. This would distract young men to think calmly and rationally.

In Hamdan's view, terrorists are a creation of the state:

the government arrests anyone who is bearded and accuses him with terrorism. This actually feeds terrorism rather than fighting against it. The other option is that the deep state used those terrorists to destabilize the country and create chaos to justify their

return to power. Those Jihadists are bats of darkness that are used by different political parties to achieve their political goals... When you, your family, your livelihood, your children, everything in your life is targeted by the police, what you expect us to do? This is what make a person a terrorist.

Similarly, Hamdan is “fully convinced that Da’ish¹⁰ is produced by America.”

Phase Three: Experimenting with radical Salafist identity.

Hamdan views himself as having been more willing to experiment than most Salafists. As he said,

Salafist groups have not learnt from their experience and their discourse is no longer convincing me. I don't live with fixed ideas. My thought is changing by the changing situation. I have a goal in mind to achieve. I am very flexible and listened to others to learn from their thoughts and experience...We just need to act based on logic, Jihadis are dogmatic.

His current view of Jihad is that it should be “postponed:”

What I am advocating for is that let's postpone Jihad for a later phase and currently focus on changing the society through Islamic education and mobilization. If those who fight against Islam and Islamists would not back down, then it is a religious duty for all Muslims to fight against them. In the current circumstances, we need to learn from everyone, regardless of their political or ideological backgrounds. We also need to create a model of civil society where all Tunisians live together, and respect each other.

He has attempted different forms of preaching, including in cafés and on television, and has enrolled on a government program to ensure that he is authorized as a preacher. He characterizes the approach with which he is experimenting as “reformist Salafist.”

My reformist Salafist approach is still experimental, but I am ready for any political changes, and if doors for Islamic preaching are closed, I will find another pathway to go on spreading the message of Islam, which is the meaning of my existence.

Repertory grid.

As indicated in Table 2, as well as in the plot of elements in construct space (Figure 2), distances between grid elements indicated that Hamdan sees himself as having moved much closer to his ideal self since becoming a Salafist, and also construes Salafists much more positively than non-Salafists. However, non-Salafists are more salient to him than Salafists. There is more conflict associated with his non-Salafist than his Salafist self.

Table 2 and Figure 2 near here.

Omar

Omar is a 30-year old unemployed university graduate who lives with his parents in a poor slum.

Phase One: Radicalization

Omar described how at university his hatred of the regime led him into left wing political activities. Although sympathetic to Islamists, he hid this “because there was no freedom of religious expression.” He also “thought that Islam is a religion of worship and moral behavior and has no link with politics.” Describing how he was disabused of this view, he said:

It was during a protest in February 2011 when I met this man who changed my life. He gave me some books to read. I read all of them and I found out that Islam can create a just society free of prejudices. Since then I have been committed to the Islamic thought and the goal of building an Islamic state.

Following this meeting, Omar joined the radical Islamic Hisb Al-Tahrir party:

I was very much welcomed and supported by Hisb Al-Tahrir members. They rehabilitated my thought and behaviors, they listened to me and they were patient with me.

However, he disagreed with the party's belief that the Islamic state has to be established with support from Muslim armies, and became more attracted to Salafism:

Salafis deserve respect. Their thoughts were distorted by the media...Salafis are not terrorists as it is presented in the media.

Indeed, rather than Salafists being terrorists, he considered that "terrorism is the creation of the deep state."

Phase Two: Actualization of radical Salafist identity.

Omar was able to elaborate a new identity combining his political and religious beliefs:

As I learned the meaning of revolution from leftists and I learnt doctrine from Islamists, the mixture of my revolutionary feelings and beliefs with Islam has created a nice feeling ... this is the image that I have been searching for, revolution from an Islamic perspective.

He contrasted his identity with that of the "silent majority:"

I know how much hard to make change but I insist not to stay silent. When you look at the eyes of martyrs' mothers, you feel ashamed to be silent. I don't want to, and I will never be, categorized with the silent majority.

He described how intimidation by a police state had faced people in Tunisia with a choice between "livelihood security or personal freedom." His choice of the latter option had

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deprived him of the former since, in his view, his failure to find employment was because of his uncompromising revolutionary stance. Similarly, he said that:

I will stay connected to my beliefs even if this leads me to live alone in this world.

Phase Three: Experimenting with radical Salafist identity.

Disappointed with the moderate Islamic government that came to power after the Arab Spring, and which he considered “betrayed the revolution,” he and other young men formed a new movement:

We believe that we can't establish an Islamic state with a corrupt leadership...We, Islamists, look at Islam as a method of life, a system that alters the corrupt global system that controls the world today...We have decided to have our path – a group of men who believe that an Islamic state would not be achieved without meeting the revolutionary demands, not to betray martyrs' blood.

Repertory grid.

As indicated in Table 3, Omar views himself as having moved closer to his ideal self since becoming a Salafist, and construes Salafists in general more positively than non-Salafists. However, non-Salafists are more salient to him than are Salafists. There are considerably more conflicts and dilemmas associated with his non-Salafist than with his Salafist self.

Table 3 near here.

Hasna

Hasna is a 21-year old female university student.

Interview.

Phase One: Radicalization

Hasna described how her interest in Salafism began in her teenage years:

I started thinking of Salafism when I was 17 years old. I grew up in a very conservative family but not religious. My father was so strict with us daughters about where to go and what to dress, but he was not praying. At my teen age, I felt that people had become empty of faith and morality. Since we were very young, we were nurtured to love God but we were not taught any more than that about God. We grew up on that everything is haram¹¹ in Islam. Haram turned to be a habit – we do things, and do not do things because they are haram, or halal¹². The teen age is usually a time of crisis, when a person starts to ask herself about the meaning of life, the meaning of God, about everything. Before I committed to the Salafi thought, I tried everything – I went out partying, dressed western clothes, and did whatever I wanted. My family did not know about what I did, but I always found a way to do whatever I wanted.

She was aware of repression by the regime, partly through her father's conflicts about his work for the secret police:

My father was working with the secret police that belonged to Ben-Ali regime. He resigned a year before the revolution...He did not use to speak so much about the regime oppression in order to avoid any troubles against the family. He returned to his job after the revolution for a year, but he could not continue and resigned again. He hated them because they treated people the same way as before the revolution.

She was also critical of Western influences on Tunisian society:

Our society seems like it is open minded and modernized because you can find bars and nightclubs, but the reality is different. In Tunis, people have so many social and psychological complexes. Drugs have become normal, also considered by some people

as a sign of modernity. These aspects were never part of the Tunisian culture. All these things came to Tunisia from the West and we followed them without thinking. Drinking alcohol does not imply that we are modern.

Phase Two: Actualization of radical Salafist identity.

She began to dress in a way that matched her developing new identity, and to learn more about Islam:

I was a disciplined person and did not follow my mood. I was also praying at my teen age. Very few girls were praying. I learnt praying by myself. I dressed the hijab few months after the revolution...The idea of dressing hijab was always in my mind since I was so young, but I was not encouraged by anyone. Before I put the hijab, I was modest in my dress for the sake of self-respect. I decided by my own to wear a proper Islamic dress. In the past, a woman who covered herself was a subject of suspicion – why she covers herself?

The first Ramadan after the revolution, I decided to go to the mosque every evening for tarawih¹³. I started to discover new things about Islam from TV channels and felt excited to follow some new ideas. For example, I found myself emotionally close to the idea of niqab¹⁴, so I put it on and I enjoyed it. After the revolution, there was a freedom to gain knowledge about Islam and Shari'a...I decided to study shari'a online for a year. I enjoyed it in comparison with my study of psychology. Most psychologists teaching in Tunisian universities show hatred of Islam and they have French education and they wanted us to think the same way as they think. Female psychologists in my university were all feminists and they tried to brainwash students to think the same way as they do. One of my lecturers used to talk about women's freedom, and when it comes

to hijab, she presented it as a sign of slavery for women. What a contradiction! How she respects homosexuals but does not respect a woman with a niqab? A woman with niqab is perceived as mutawahesh¹⁵, denied humanity. How should I accept such thought, or ideology? I found myself so angry with those people, who thought that they are the best and became more engaged to learn more about Islam in different ways: from TV channels, in the mosques and from Sheikhs.

Phase Three: Experimenting with radical Salafist identity.

Her experiments with her identity have included addressing gender issues, and working for an organization that promotes understanding of Islam:

I am now enjoying my role in the organization... However, I criticize the organization management because it is only led by men and women do not have an important role ...The leaders of the organization actually feel scared of me and can't argue with me because they don't have a strong logic to oppress women...We all belong to the Salafi ideology but we think in different ways. We need to change the attitudes of those men towards women. I work against violence against women. If men in the organization accept me as I am, it is OK, if not, I am going to leave and find another organization. These men are contradictory.

Repertory grid.

As indicated in Table 4 and Figure 3, Hasna sees herself as having moved much closer to her ideal self since becoming a Salafist, and also views Salafists more positively than non-Salafists, although the latter are more salient to her. There is little difference in the level of conflict associated with her Salafist and non-Salafist selves.

Table 4 and Figure 3 near here.

Hassan

Hassan is a 23-year old university student, who grew up in a low income family.

Interview.

Phase One: Radicalization

Hassan described how, as a child, he followed, and indeed exceeded, his parents' religious beliefs and practices:

My family was conservative; I was the most devout of them. I prayed regularly including morning prayers since the age of seven. I have accepted the reality of my family. Like them, I was a pious Muslim, and did not question their approach to religion. I completely followed their behavior.

It was another member of his family who introduced him to radical Islam:

My older brother was an active member in Al-Tahrir Party. He used to assign me a few simple tasks like delivering the party's paper to Salafi youth...Al-Tahrir Party is a radical Islamic party which wants to apply Islamic laws (sharia) to govern the country... Al-Tahrir Party's ultimate goal is to install a Caliphate.

Going to university provided an opportunity to further his involvement with this party and to develop relationships with its members:

Great development in my life happened when I moved to pursue my university studies I have had the opportunity to meet and discuss with a number of leaders of Al-Tahrir party...I carefully followed the training seminars organized by the leaders at the headquarters as well as I regularly attended debates the party youth held in coffee shops or at someone's home...My relationship with the party youth was excellent. We often meet at someone's home or at the mosque and help each other...We enjoyed a distinctive relationship built on mutual support and solidarity

He described the doctrines to which he became committed at this time thus:

We were convinced by the party leaders and preachers that everyone is against our leaders because they are defending Islam. We were mobilized to destroy any secular, western, and Zionist forces which symbolized major enemies and threats to Islam...Personally, I have become convinced that we must fight all the enemies of Islam, those who are against the establishment of an Islamic state and the application of sharia. I believed that the establishment of the Caliphate would lead to justice, equality, and a morally righteous society; a strong state which is not controlled by the West. I was ready to do all the needed sacrifices until this goal is achieved. I was even ready to die for it. That was a goal that I lived for and was obsessed with. Of course, in return, I knew that I would go to paradise and enjoy its bounties and nymphs.

His sneer as he spoke the last sentence reflected the growing realization of inconsistencies in these doctrines:

As I was a staunch believer in the idea of a Caliphate, I kept searching for intellectual and ideological grounding for the party's arguments. Then I began to realize several contradictions of rational and ideological underpinning opposing to the texts of Quran or Hadith. For example, the party adopts the ideological conflict and political struggle approach to achieve change, which is contrary to God's word...After a long process of critical thinking where I submitted what I received at the party discussion series to pure reason and logic, I was crashed into several inconsistencies. Through research, I also noticed that the party leaders twist the texts to highlight what is in line with their agenda and leave what might weaken their arguments and cause them embarrassment. I voiced my concerns about the contradictory and limited interpretation of the texts to some party leaders in an attempt to find answers that could convince me, but they kept perpetuating shallow and illogical justifications.

It was at this point that he was introduced to Jihadist Salafism:

During that period of doubt concerning the intellectual background of Al-Tahrir Party, I met a few young members who belong to Salafi Jihadism in the mosque. I noticed that their interpretation of the texts is more faithful. They also insist on applying the Islamic law in appearance as well as in practice.... Initially, I found that the Jihadist Salafist group gives more freedom for young people, which was not the case with Hisb Al-Tahrir. Indeed, young Salafi jihadists can be critical of their leaders and oppose their decisions... My conviction with the Salafi Jihadist ideology intensified after listening to their "Sheikhs" and read their references. I felt they are the closest to Islam. Furthermore, the young Salafi Jihadists were more enthusiastic than Al-Tahrir youth to establish the Caliphate and apply Sharia...I soon adopted these radical views. I felt completely comfortable with them because through Jihad for the sake of Allah, I would ultimately guarantee my way to paradise.

Phase Two: Actualization of radical Salafist identity.

Hassan changed his appearance to match his new Salafist identity, although not without some difficulty:

I grew my beard after I joined Salafi Jihadism so that my intellectual affiliation becomes in harmony with my appearance and my everyday practices. Yet, I was not comfortable enough. I felt confused because the beard did not match with my life style as a modern young adult. This change was not easy and smooth at all.

He also immersed himself in activities on behalf of his new group:

I was seriously committed to the group.. ...I was strongly supported and encouraged by the leaders. My work was recognized and appreciated. Thus, I was ready to sacrifice everything for the sake of the group's project and agenda. I wasted a lot of time at the

expense of my study. I even stopped going to university for a year. I was ready to drop out of school for the sake of Jihad.

Phase Three: Experimenting with radical Salafist identity.

Hassan's principal experimentation with his Salafist identity concerned the decision whether to follow the path of Jihad to Syria:

I thought seriously about going to Syria for Jihad. A close friend of mine went to Syria and martyred there. It was me who recruited him to be part of Jihadist militants. I feel terribly guilty and sorry for what happened to him. Two of my dearest friends died in Syria. They sacrificed their lives for a mere illusion. I was supposed to follow the same path, and become a victim of a mere illusion. Fortunately, before I make my final decision about going to Syria, I decided to carry on my truth-seeking journey, which I started during my activism within Al-Tahrir Party. I compared Quran and Sunnah texts to the practice of the Jihadist group. I came to the conclusion that both groups I aligned myself with try to justify the inconsistencies of the texts with illogical arguments that do not make sense at all. I also figured out that their thoughts and convictions are not the outcome of their own analysis and research. They passively receive and endorse what was told to them. As my doubts and suspicions grew, my inner conflict aggravated particularly when question the ideas that I adopted and defended. Thus, I withdrew from the group and locked myself at home for almost a year looking for "the truth" before taking my decision concerning Jihad in Syria.

Phase Four: The choice to self-deradicalize.

Hassan's decision process about Syria set him on the path not to Jihad but to deradicalization since, as he said, "During that time I called into question the Salafi doctrine itself." However, it was far more than just Salafism that he came to question:

I was living major conflicts with myself. The identity of Man is not just a piece of soft clay one can mold and shape according to temporary needs. A person's identity is a set of negotiations with himself, his surroundings, and cultural and religious heritage. These negotiations put me through a number of struggles. I had to transcend my inherited beliefs as they no longer correspond to my intellectual growth. Submitting religious texts to reason and logic helped me understand the discrepancy between reality and the discourse utilized by both Al-Tahrir party and Salafi Jihadists. From that moment on I started to doubt religion itself...The promotion of Islam as a religion of high moral and ethical values such as tolerance and forgiveness is contrastive to practices such as capturing booty, women raping, and defamation. When I noticed the insistence of Jihadi Salafists to follow these practices that have no meaning in our time, I began to feel that Islam is full of contradictions...These contradictions destabilized my psychological wellbeing as I felt that I do not defend the righteous cause I once believed in. My doubts were summed in one question: What is the reality behind the existence of Islam?... I came to the conclusion that there is no such thing as religion or Islam. Consequently, my relationship with Islam as a faith ended. I start to believe in universal values as they are larger and deeper than any religion. I think what connects me with a Muslim can connect me with a Christian or any other human being, regardless of their religion. I feel that Islam divides people rather than unifies them. Certainly, this phase was the most difficult...It was not an easy decision to abandon Islam; a religion which I devoted my entire existence to serve.

Having abandoned Islam, Hassan was faced with a new choice:

After giving up on Islam, I was left with two choices, either to convert to another religion such as Christianity or renounce the idea of religion. I had already a view of other religions, particularly Christianity. The idea that Jesus was the son of God and the Virgin

Mary seemed irrational to me. How can a virgin give birth to a child? Such contradictions made me reject the whole concept of religion. I felt that the function of religion is to maintain morality among people by means of persuasion and intimidation. Conversely, these things do not tempt me any more. I am not a child waiting to be rewarded with candies when behaving well. I see that our lives are limited to this physical, finite, and earthly world. One's life is finished as soon as one dies. There can be no life after death. This is simply the truth.

He therefore searched for a group that shared an alternative view of the world to which he could subscribe:

As I was looking for an alternative world with new people who share my new worldviews, I found a group called Atheist Republic on Facebook...I have resorted to the virtual world in order to re-build once again my social circle...At first, this group represented an open and a free platform where I could talk about taboo topics. After a while our relationship grew into a solid friendship which I am glad and honored to have.

However, as well as allowing the development of new relationships, Hassan's transition to atheism impacted greatly on his former relationships:

Nonetheless, this shift – becoming atheist - was not smooth and easy given the influence of my family and social environment. I kept praying for three months hoping that Allah would save me from this illusion and guide me to his right path. How can I give up everything I used to strongly believe in since my childhood? How can I give up rituals I practised all my life? Is everything that I experienced was a mere illusion? I was also thinking of my friends. It was not easy to abandon them because we enjoyed a special relationship.

As a possible attempt at social reengagement, Hassan has now joined a nationalist political party.

Repertory grid.

Hassan's grid¹⁶ does not present an entirely clear picture. As indicated by the sums of squares accounted for by these elements (see Table 5), the self after becoming an atheist is somewhat less salient than the self when he was Salafist, but Salafist elements in general are less salient than non-Salafist elements. However, element distances indicate that he has moved closer to his ideal self since becoming an atheist, and, as is evident in the plot of elements in construct space derived from his grid (Figure 4), Salafist elements in general are further from his ideal self than are non-Salafist elements. In addition, less conflict and considerably fewer dilemmas are associated with himself as an atheist than with himself as a Salafist. Dilemmas concerning his view of himself as a Salafist were that this involved being defiant, careful, fanatic, expressive, and biased, and whereas he preferred to be compliant, not fanatic, not expressive, and just, the preferred poles of these constructs have such negative implications as being cowardly and double-tongued. The structural analysis of his constructs indicates that "Salafist" constructs differentiate more between elements and have higher Intensity, providing a more structured view of the world, than do "non-Salafist" constructs.

Table 5 and Figure 4 near here.

Saleem

Saleem is a 24-year old university student from a poor family.

Interview.

Phase One: Radicalization

Saleem described how he only began to pray regularly about 3 years before the Tunisian uprising. At this time,

I had no particular thoughts of Islam but I was in love with religion and Islamic thoughts.

I was also so passionate towards the idea of establishing an Islamic state.

This passion may be traced to his childhood experiences:

The major problem I had in my family was my father used to come back home drunk and most of the time abused me and my mother. He beat my mother several times in front of me...as a result I hate alcohol, I hate the state that makes it legal. This is why I felt attracted to the idea of building an Islamic state because alcohol will be forbidden.

He described how his ideas were originally obtained from TV channels, but how his friend (Hassan in the previous example) then convinced him to join Hisb al-Tahrir. A further motivation was that:

I also heard so many stories about how Islamists were tortured by Ben-Ali, which made me more enthusiastic to know more about Islam.

However, he left Hisb al-Tahrir after about a year, leading some of his friends to abandon him:

The reason why I withdrew from the Hisb is their doctrine. For example, they change their Islamic interpretation in order to be applicable in the real life. Hisb Al-Tahrir do not want to confront the government until they receive support from Muslim armies. Another reason why I withdrew from Al-Tahrir is that they forced us to adopt their views in Islam...Hisb Al-Tahrir is the most dogmatic Islamic party. They don't give you chance to think or criticize any of their ideas.

A Salafist whom he met in a mosque then “convinced me with his thoughts.” Describing the difference between the two approaches, he said that:

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[Article accepted in the Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 23/12/2018.](#)

Hisb Al Tahrir appropriates sharia to be applicable with real life, while Salafis appropriate real life to respond to sharia.

Phase Two: Actualization of radical Salafist identity.

Saleem's principal elaboration of his Salafist identity was by going to wage Jihad in Syria.

As he said,

after I joined the Salafi-Jihadi group, I immediately thought of travelling to Syria. I was waiting for the first opportunity...I was basically motivated by how I was indoctrinated by my Salafi friend– text proceeds reason – and Quran urges for Jihad... believe we have to fight against Muslims who abandoned their religion, this is apostasy.

His description of his experience of Jihad was as follows:

My beliefs in Jihad became deeper and stronger by being involved in Jihad. I was not scared and I was not negatively influenced by the scenes of killing and death. I actually had a feeling of comfort because if I died I would be a martyr, means I would not lose anything.

Phase Three: Experimenting with radical Salafist identity.

Saleem's experimentation in Syria did not go according to plan as he became separated from the friend with whom he travelled there, and mistakenly joined a Jihadist group that was different, and opposed to, his friend's group. He described his predicament thus:

I went to Syria to fight against Bashar's army, not to fight against each other. If I stayed, I would be now fighting against my friend who belonged to Al-Nusra that does not support Da'ish, while I was Al-Sham that supports Da'ish.

As a result of this, Saleem decided to return to Tunisia. Reflecting on his experiences, he said:

I have never felt regretted that I travelled to Syria... It was an experience that I learnt so much from, especially in terms of my religion. I realized that I need to be very careful when I take any decision related to my religion. Islam has several doctrines and a person has to linger before taking a decision to follow any doctrine.

Phase Four: The choice to self-deradicalize.

Saleem was very affected by the rejection that he experienced by fellow Salafists when he returned from Syria:

I am a person who strongly influenced by people around me. Before traveling to Syria, my social relations were confined to Salafi friends. I used to have very strong Salafi friends. After my return, I was surprised that they completely abandoned me. Then I decided to go back to my older friends. As it is said in Tunisia, "a friend is a dragger," he pulls you up towards him. If your friend is religious, you become religious. If he is apathy, you are influenced by him. I gradually went back to my normal life, as before I joined Islamist groups.

He described how, as a result, he "gradually moved away from religious practices," and adopted a more hedonistic lifestyle, smoking and playing cards. However, he did not entirely give up his sympathy for Da'ish:

All super power cooperates against Da'ish, America, Iraqi government, Gulf countries, Kurds all cooperate against Da'ish. I still have an inclination towards it but not from a doctrinal perspective but I deal with it as my favorite football team. I follow its news and feel happy when it wins.

Apart from this, he considered that:

I have become a different person. I believe that people have to have the freedom to choose their thoughts and their doctrines. I myself changed because humans are weak against their desire of life. Life is more attractive than death. I am thinking of myself, caring of

it. Being rejected by my old friends has stimulated me to change my thoughts and my behaviors to create new friends.

Repertory Grid.

Although sums of squares accounted for by the elements indicate that Saleem's Salafist self is more salient than his non-Salafist self (see Table 6), non-Salafist elements are more salient for him than are Salafist elements, all of which are in one quadrant of the plot of elements in construct space derived from the grid (Figure 5). Element distances indicate that he moved slightly further away from his ideal self after becoming a Salafist, and Salafist elements in general are further from his ideal self than are non-Salafist elements. There is far more conflict associated with his Salafist than his non-Salafist self, and also more dilemmas associated with the Salafist self. These dilemmas (which are reflected in the positioning of the constructs involved in them in Figure 5) concern his construal of himself as a Salafist as socially isolated, quick tempered, and pessimistic; his preference for being sociable, sober minded, and optimistic; but his association of these latter characteristics with such negative implications as being careless and fearful. Also, his "Salafist" constructs are less highly structured than his "non-Salafist" constructs.

Table 6 and Figure 5 near here.

The interviews: a synthesis

The accounts of the interviewees in most cases presented them as people who from an early age experimented with alternative constructions of events and with associated behaviors. This was sometimes coupled with rejection of constructions promulgated by the state or the media, such as constellatory¹⁷ or preemptive¹⁸ construing of Islamists. Their exposure, either directly or indirectly, to state oppression of Islam and associated humiliation, or to invalidating

experiences associated with “Western” practices condoned by the regime, such as drinking alcohol, was influential in their coming to construe Islam in an increasingly favorable light, in contrast with their construing of the state.

Their early experimentation with different lifestyles was not necessarily entirely comfortable, as in Sami’s description of this as having “no goal,” and by contrast identification with Islam and increasingly with Salafism provided them with certainty and structure. Thus, for Sami, it offered a “balanced style of life;” for Hamdan “the meaning of my existence,” including validation of his construction of himself as a potential leader by becoming a reformist preacher; and for Omar “the image I have been searching for,” an Islamic revolutionary. In personal construct theory terms, this could be viewed as involving shifts from loose to tighter construing and from dilation to constriction as these individuals made choices that allowed them to elaborate their construing and their identities.

Most of the young people were initially introduced to radical views by persuasive individuals, either in person or on television channels. In Sami’s case, having always construed himself as “a good man” but with the qualification that humans are “never complete,” he met a Sheikh who, while validating his self-construction as having “a good spirit,” also validated his sense of incompleteness by remarking that God had been “patient” with him. The Sheikh then pointed the way to completeness by a path of “commitment to God’s words.” For Sami, this was “the critical moment I had in my life,” and similarly Omar described meeting a man who “changed my life” by giving him books that led him to reconstrue Islam, while Saleem met a Salafist who “convinced me by his thoughts.”

The interviewees invested in various ways in, and elaborated, their developing identities as Islamists, for example by changing their appearances (as in the cases of Hasna and Hassan) and engaging in more devout religious practices, or by joining groups which provided them

with further validation of their developing constructions and, as Hassan put it, “a distinctive relationship built on mutual support and solidarity.” However, it was apparent in all of the young people interviewed that their experimentation did not cease since the process of radicalization involved continual Experience Cycles. Rather than passively accepting radical dogma, they constantly experimented with new constructions, revising these if necessary. This is particularly apparent in the three interviewees (Omar, Hassan, and Saleem) who initially joined Hisb al-Tahrir, but then rejected it in favor of Salafism. For another interviewee, Hamdan, a traditional Salafist identity was rejected in favor of a more reformist approach. In some cases (Sami, Hamdan, Hassan, and Saleem), their process of experimentation included the identification of inconsistencies or dogmatism in the views and actions of particular Islamic groups, allowing them to construe themselves by contrast as “logical” or “flexible.”

The young people’s decision processes can be viewed in terms of Kelly’s (1955) Circumspection-Preemption-Control Cycle. For some interviewees, such as Omar and Hamdan, their decisions concerned whether to take the hard option of attempting to make a change rather than staying silent, or similarly to opt for personal freedom rather than security of their livelihood, or resistance rather than submission. For others, such as Hasna and Hassan, the decisions included whether to wear “proper Islamic dress.” In most of the interviewees, a particularly important superordinate construct was whether or not to engage in, or support, Jihad. While Jihad was rejected by two of the interviewees (Sami and Hamdan), at least for the time being, two others (Hassan and Saleem) embraced it, at least partly in anticipation that it might allow them to further elaborate their identities by becoming martyrs and entering paradise. However, they then suffered massive invalidation of core construing, in one case experiencing guilt after the death of a friend whom he had persuaded to fight in Syria, and in another case finding himself fighting against fellow Muslims. Their response to this invalidation was essentially one of deradicalization, the process of which was one of further

Circumspection-Preemption-Control and Experience Cycles, in which the importance of finding groups that validated their new constructions was particularly apparent.

Repertory grid scores of whole group

Of the eight repertory grid measures considered, three showed statistically significant differences (all $W(6) = 0; p < 0.05$) in participants' construing in relation to the group with which they currently identified as compared to the other group. Thus, their self-constructions as members of the current group were more positive and less conflictual than as non-members of this group, and they construed members of the current group in general more positively than non-members.

DISCUSSION

Processes of construing

It is apparent that in the young people interviewed radicalization was not a passive process, but one in which they actively engaged in successive radicalization cycles¹⁹, combining elements of Kelly's Experience, Creativity, and Circumspection-Preemption-Control Cycles. Thus, they continually developed and tested out new constructions, seeking out sources of social validation for these and/or exploring their internal consistency, and revising them if they were invalidated. Construing was loosened while the new constructions were developing and then retightened in order to test these constructions. Every cycle also involved decision processes, in which there were successive stages of circumspection, preemption, and control, mostly in relation to the young people's new identities and the elaboration of these. These same cyclical processes were equally evident during deradicalization in those interviewees who went down this path.

The interviewees' initial exploration of radical new constructions in most cases appeared to be consistent with a stance of experimentation in their approach to life. While for some (for example, Hamdan and Saleem), episodes of major invalidation appeared to be a factor in this particular exploration, in others invalidation seemed to be a more gradual and insidious process. However, in those who became deradicalized, this appeared to be triggered by episodes of massive invalidation that was both threatening and guilt-provoking as it involved core constructs.

The processes of construing evident in the interviewees bear some resemblance to those that were identified in a personal construct formulation of a person with very different radical beliefs, Anders Breivik (Winter & Tschudi, 2015). For example, one of the decisions faced by some of the interviewees, of taking a difficult, radical path rather than opting for security, is similar to Breivik's description of a choice between the risky option of completely focusing on the "European resistance movement" or the easy option of creating a large family (Winter & Tschudi, 2015). Also not dissimilar to Breivik, who retreated to his room for a year before engaging on his murderous "project," was the constriction of their worlds in some of the interviewees as a prelude to reconstruing. As Hassan described it, "I withdrew from the group and locked myself at home for about a year looking for the 'truth' before taking my decision." Like Breivik, Hassan, as he reconstrued, sought validation in the "virtual world."

Structure and content of construing

The most consistent findings with the repertory grid were that the group with which the individual came to identify in every case allowed him or her to develop a more positive self-construction and a reduction, in most cases considerable, in conflict in self-construing. In all cases, members of the group with which the person came to identify were also viewed more favorably than members of the other group.

The grid results of Hassan and Saleem, both of whom became deradicalized, indicated that taking the path of deradicalization considerably reduced the conflict and dilemmas in their construing. However, it was also apparent that they have yet to develop a new non-Salafist view of the self and the world that provides them with at least as much structure and certainty as their previous Salafist views. They may therefore be considered to be in a transitional stage. By contrast, Sami's repertory grid indicated that his Salafist identity offered him more structure and less conflict than his previous non-Salafist identity. Although in Sami's case, Salafist elements, including himself as a Salafist, were much more meaningful to him than non-Salafists, a similar pattern was not observed in the other participants who remained Salafists. However, in those Salafists for whom non-Salafist were more salient than Salafist elements, it appeared that this was due to the extreme negative construing of the former elements, perhaps allowing these individuals to better define themselves by contrast with these highly undesirable non-Salafists. As Neimeyer (2002, p. 298, italics in original) has described, "*demonized others may be a critical condition for maintaining the phenomenological validity of our position.*"

Research methods

As in various previous studies (Turpin, Dallos, Owen, & Thomas, 2009; Yorke & Dallos, 2015; Winter, 2016b, 2018), including an investigation of "Jihadi terrorists" in India (Canter, Sarangi, & Youngs, 2014; Sarangi, Canter, & Youngs, 2013), the present research has indicated the complementarity of a relatively unstructured interview procedure with repertory grid technique, the former providing particular insight into processes, and the latter into features of the structure and content, of construing. The grid measures concerning construct structure provided a less consistent picture than most of those concerning the construing of particular elements, and may require refinement and exploration in further research. This apparent greater

utility of element than of construct measures derived from grids is consistent with some previous literature (Bell, Vince, & Costigan, 2002; Winter, 2003).

While the narrative interview used in the current study did elicit rich accounts of the interviewees' experiences, future research in this area might usefully employ Experience Cycle Methodology (Oades & Viney, 2012) in order to trace more precisely participants' progress through such cycles.

Strengths and limitations

As well as the use of mixed methods which allowed the elicitation of the views of the research participants in their own words, another strength of the present study was the care taken to develop trust, and engage, with the Salafist community from which the participants were recruited. This facilitated the collection of rich data from individuals who might otherwise have been very difficult to access. Although the sampling strategy was deliberately slanted towards the recruitment of relatively well-educated participants from middle class backgrounds, partly in order not to comply with a stereotype promoted in the mass media of Tunisian Salafists as socially deprived extremists, it should be acknowledged that the views of more socially deprived Salafists were perhaps under-represented. Further research using similar methodology might usefully focus on this group. Another limitation of the findings presented above is that, because one of our aims was to present data from both the unstructured interview and the repertory grid, this paper is based on slightly less than a quarter of the participants in the original study, thus perhaps further limiting the generality of the conclusions that can be drawn from it. Finally, it should be noted that, although a synthesis, drawing upon personal construct theory, has been provided of themes derived from the interviews, this does not preclude the need for a more thorough deductive content analysis. It is intended that, guided by the personal construct model and the initial synthesis, this will now be conducted on all 25 interviews from

the larger study from which the present participants were derived, and will be reported in a further paper.

Implications for deradicalization

The interviewees' stories clearly indicate that their views of themselves and the world are open to reconstruction, which may include self-deradicalization, for example in response to massive invalidation of the type faced by Hassan and Saleem and/or the recognition of inconsistencies in the views to which they subscribed. Successful deradicalization would require an alternative construction which offers at least as favorable a view of the self as does the current "radical" construction, as well as a reduction in conflicts and dilemmas.

Individuals who have themselves been deradicalized, or whose radical views do not include an acceptance of violence, may be able to play a valuable role in the deradicalization of others (Muhanna-Matar, 2017), not least because of their ability to show sociality²⁰ with radicalized people. By contrast, as is apparent from the interviewees' accounts, any approach which involves trying to impose alternative constructions on the radicalized individual is likely to be counter-productive. The interviewees clearly resisted attempts to force them to change their beliefs and favored Islamist groups that were not construed as dogmatic and that allowed freedom of expression, including of views that were critical of the leaders of the groups.

It was also evident from the interviewees that oppressive measures, such as those based on equating radical views with violent extremism (as in treating Salafists homogeneously as Jihadists despite the fact that some of them disavow violence) may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of inciting violence in those with radical beliefs who were previously non-violent. Although this may at one level appear counter-productive, at another level it allows validation

of constructions that Salafists are violent and further justification of the policies of an oppressive regime. It is essentially a process of hostility, in Kelly's (1955) sense of extorting evidence for constructions. Since, as indicated in the personal construct analysis of Anders Breivik's actions (Winter & Tschudi, 2015), similar processes of Kellyan hostility may operate in radicalized individuals, the result may be a hostile spiral of mutual validation of negative constructions of the other which are used to justify further violence.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has indicated the utility of a combination of narrative interview and repertory grid methods in exploring radicalization, aspects of the personal construct model of which have received some further support. Specifically, to return to our research questions, it is apparent that the Tunisian Salafists whom we studied were engaged in constant cycles of construing and reconstruing in which they constituted and reconstituted their identities, developing more positive and less conflictual views of themselves. This process could involve not only radicalization but also deradicalization, the latter in response to massive invalidation of aspects of their radical constructions, with concomitant threat and/or guilt. While our findings indicate the possibility of self-deradicalization, and ways in which deradicalization may be facilitated, they also caution against the forceful subjugation of radical views and indeed against the assumption that deradicalization is necessarily desirable, even in those whose radical views are not associated with support of violence.

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Grid Measure	Salafist	Non-Salafist
salience of self	9.95	3.88
salience of others	41.77	24.73
negativity of self-construing	0.23	0.72
negativity of other element-construing	2.89	4.04
conflicts	0.6	6.5
dilemmas	4	3
usefulness of constructs	40.73	41.74
structure of constructs	0.97	1.39

Table 1. Sami's repertory grid scores

Grid Measure	Salafist	Non-Salafist
salience of self	3.62	5.87
salience of others	15.37	29.25
negativity of self-construing	0.76	1.25
negativity of other element-construing	2.45	3.67
conflicts	2.90	4.30
dilemmas	0	0
usefulness of constructs	45.05	29.73
structure of constructs	2.09	2.18

Table 2. Hamdan's repertory grid scores

Grid Measure	Salafist	Non-Salafist
salience of self	2.60	2.94
salience of others	15.11	24.13
negativity of self-construing	0.35	0.68
negativity of other element-construing	1.43	2.67
conflicts	2.50	7.50
dilemmas	0	4
usefulness of constructs	36.18	42.16
structure of constructs	0.84	1.12

Table 3. Omar's repertory grid scores

Grid Measure	Salafist	Non-Salafist
salience of self	10.84	7.63
salience of others	18.16	35.94
negativity of self-construing	0.42	1.16
negativity of other element-construing	2.95	4.28
conflicts	10.10	10.80
dilemmas	0	0
usefulness of constructs	39.59	35.58
structure of constructs	0.64	1.07

Table 4. Hasna's repertory grid scores

Grid Measure	Salafist	Non-Salafist
salience of self	8.01	7.10 (atheist self)
salience of others	34.14	35.83
negativity of self-construing	1.25	0.96 (atheist self)
negativity of other element-construing	3.60	2.57
conflicts	8.40	6.30 (atheist self)
dilemmas	18	4
usefulness of constructs	44.65	33.64
structure of constructs	3.40	1.21

Table 5. Hassan's repertory grid scores

Grid Measure	Salafist	Non-Salafist
salience of self	8.46	4.74
salience of others	36.62	44.49
negativity of self-construing	1.08	1.02
negativity of other element-construing	4.55	4.30
conflicts	12.40	0.60
dilemmas	6	4
usefulness of constructs	40.01	41.72
structure of constructs	0.87	1.50

Table 6. Saleem's repertory grid scores

12/24/2017 (8:54:50 AM)

Slater Analyses for Sami

Axis Range: -8.97 to 8.97

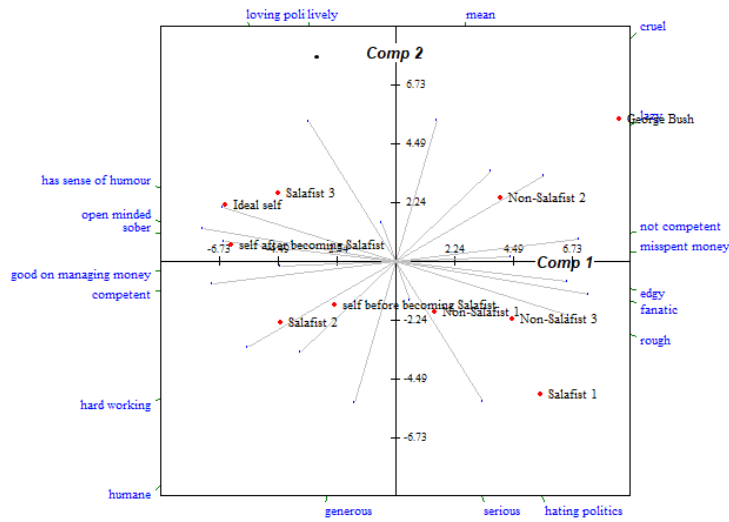


Figure 1. Plot of elements in construct space from Sami's repertory grid

12/24/2017 (8:54:50 AM)

Slater Analyses for Sami

Axis Range: -8.97 to 8.97

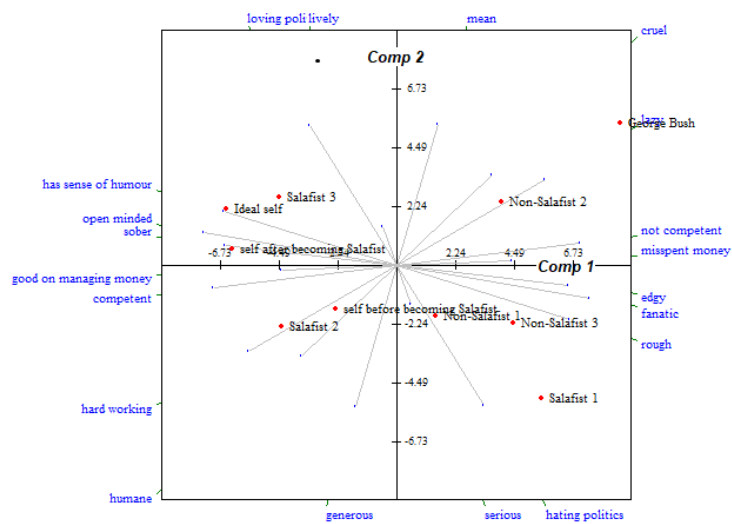


Figure 2. Plot of elements in construct space from Hamdan's repertory grid

12/27/2017 (6:34:34 AM)

Slater Analyses for Hasna

Axis Range: -5.00 to 5.00

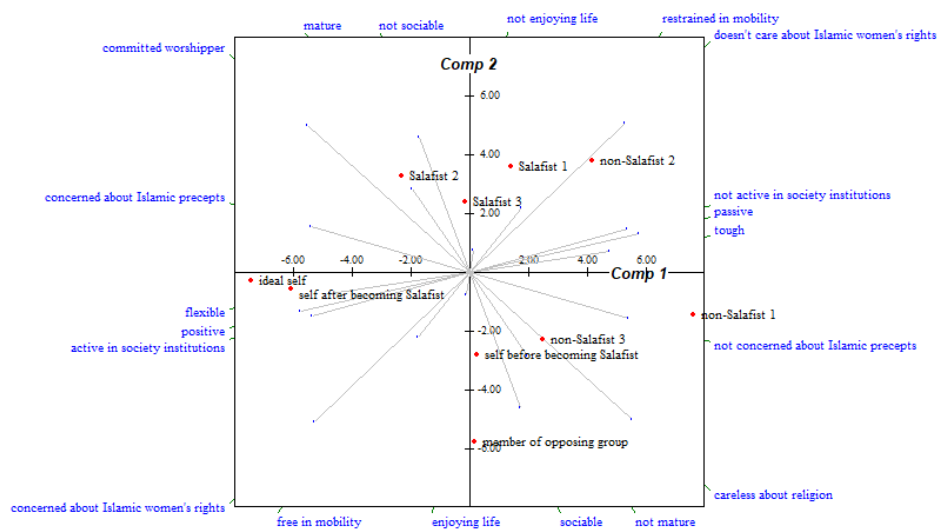


Figure 3. Plot of elements in construct space from Hasna's repertory

12/27/2017 (6:37:57 AM)

Slater Analyses for Hassan

Axis Range: -9.93 to 9.93

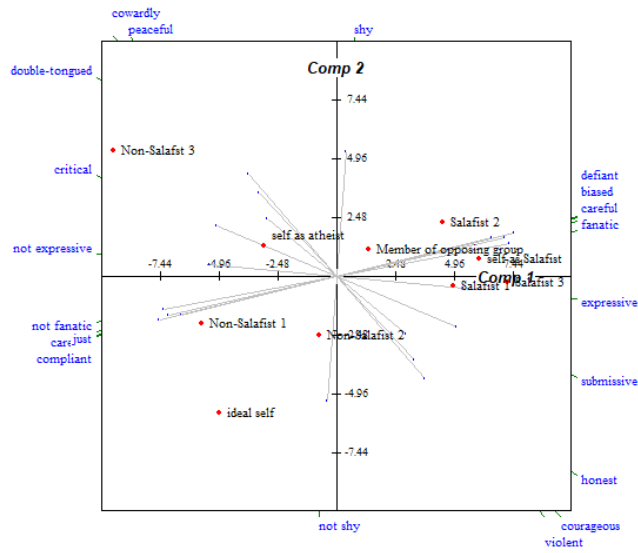


Figure 4. Plot of elements in construct space from Hassan's repertory grid

18/08/2016 (11:52:42)

Slater Analyses for Saleem

Axis Range: -7.26 to 7.26

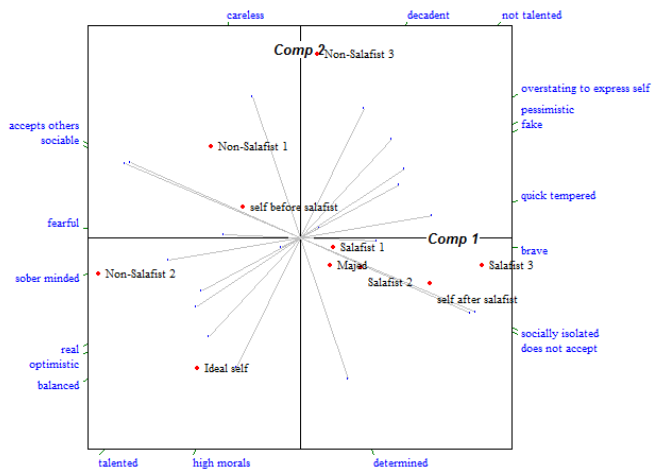


Figure 5. Plot of elements in construct space from Saleem's repertory grid

¹ Some of the findings from this study were presented at the 21st. International Congress of Personal Construct Psychology and sections of the participants' quotes and Figures 1 and 5 are reproduced by permission of Cambridge Scholars Press from Muhanna-Matar and Winter (2017).

² The Arabic translation is "scientific."

³ struggle, often used to refer to holy war

⁴ Islamic law

⁵ The Reform Front

⁶ infidel

⁷ distinctiveness

⁸ The moderate Islamist (not Salafist) party that gained power after the Tunisian revolution.

⁹ a Jihadist cell

¹⁰ ISIS

¹¹ forbidden

¹² allowed

¹³ intense prayers after breaking of the fast

¹⁴ face covering

¹⁵ savage

¹⁶ Some of Hassan's grid results were inaccurately described in an earlier report on this study due to a misunderstanding about the elicited elements.

¹⁷ stereotyped construing

¹⁸ "nothing but" construing

¹⁹ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the use of this term.

²⁰ essentially, ability to view the world through the other's eyes