Self-Radicalization Effects of Assuming That Behaviors Will Generalize Across Situations

Murphy Marx, Ashley McFeeley, Nick Jones, Leslie Nolan, Elaine Slaven, Chris Holland

Department of Psychology, Texas Christian University

Email: murphy.marx@tcu.edu

Introduction

When do people self-radicalize? When and how, for instance, do so-called "lone wolves" go from mild dislike for a target group to extreme hatred, all without any negative additional information? The evidence gathered about recent lone wolf terror attacks around the world suggests that the attackers all too often sat in a room somewhere and simply "thought" themselves into extremely negative attitudes. How does this self-radicalization happen?

The present research examined one such mechanism to self-radicalization; **generalization**.

Present Research

Attitude Representation Theory (Lord & Lepper, 1999)
- People construct attitudes online, from the handful of associations to the attitude object that occur at any given time.
- The attitude displayed on any single occasion depends on the subset of all possible associations that are activated *at that time*.

Self Radicalization
- Adopting a more negative attitude toward a stimulus at time 2 than at time 1 *without any additional external information.*
- Can occur through self-generated thoughts

Generalization
- People often *over*generalize, expecting more cross-situational consistency of behavior than actually exists (Mischel, 1968).

Methods

Participants: 135 MTurk workers of different ages and backgrounds.

Procedure

Initial Information: All participants were told about a fictitious group, identified as VSG#62, that were described with 14 mildly negative traits.

> **Example Item:** "We tend to be **choosy**. Everything has to be just so to please me, and I know that the other club members do the same."

Baseline Attitudes: Participants indicated how likeable the group was and if they would like to join VSG#62.

Control Condition: By random assignment, half of the participants completed math problems for five minutes.

Manipulation (Generalization) Condition: By random assignment, half of the participants wrote for five minutes how members of VSG#62 may display the 14 traits in a work and social setting.

Demographics: Various individual differences assessed.

Recall: Participants were asked to recall the original traits described by members of the group.

Post Attitudes: Participants were asked again to indicate how likeable VSG#62 was on various measures.
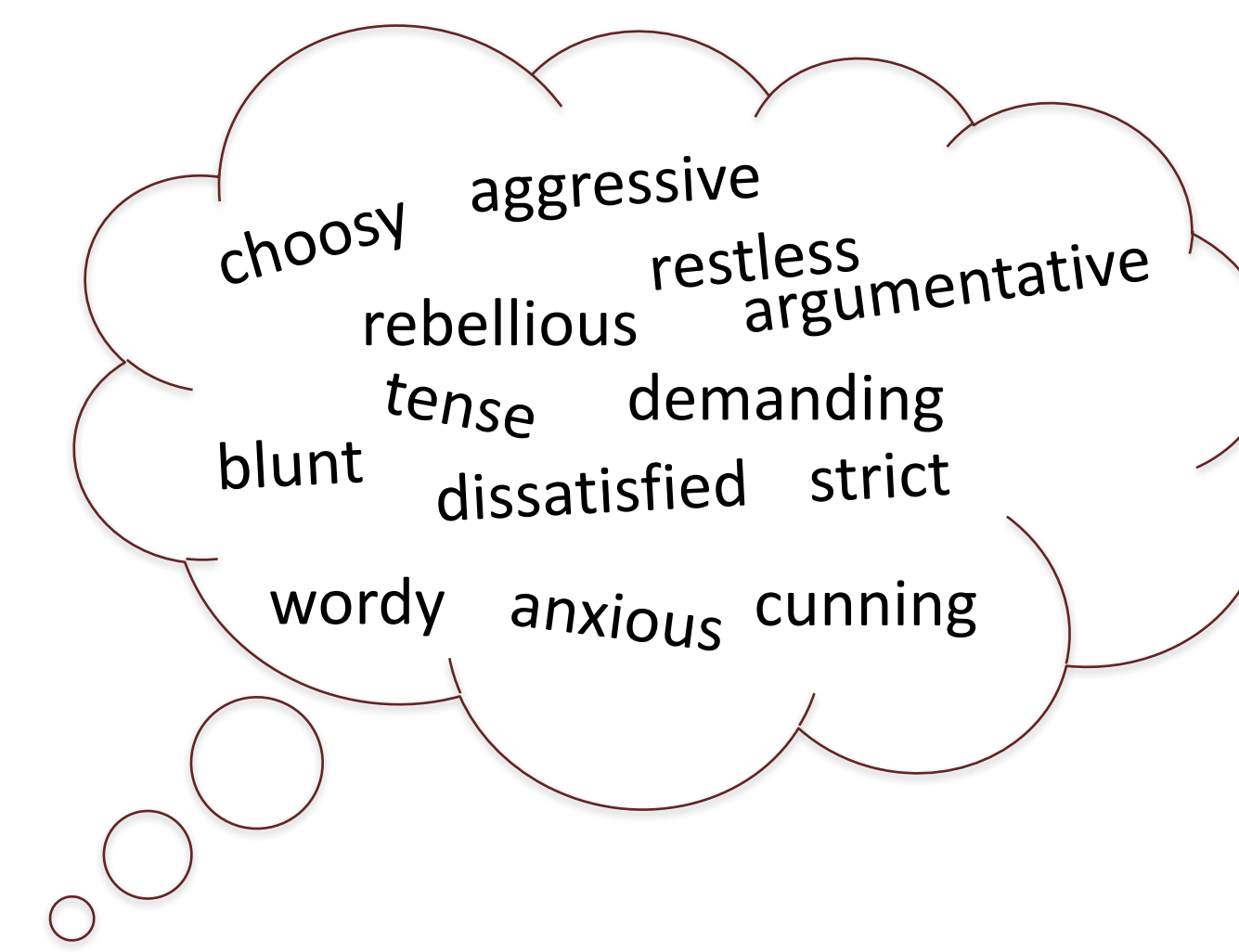
Sample Generalizations

"Would be very hot-headed and really hard to work with"

"Micromanaging every detail...and not willing to compromise"

"In a work situation someone in this club would be a pushy office jerk, intentionally trying to start fights"

"Out shopping they would start arguments with other customer, and may even get physical when angry"

"I feel they would be violent towards the situation both verbally and physically"

"They argue over who gets to do the worst tasks, like violent crime or drug smuggling"

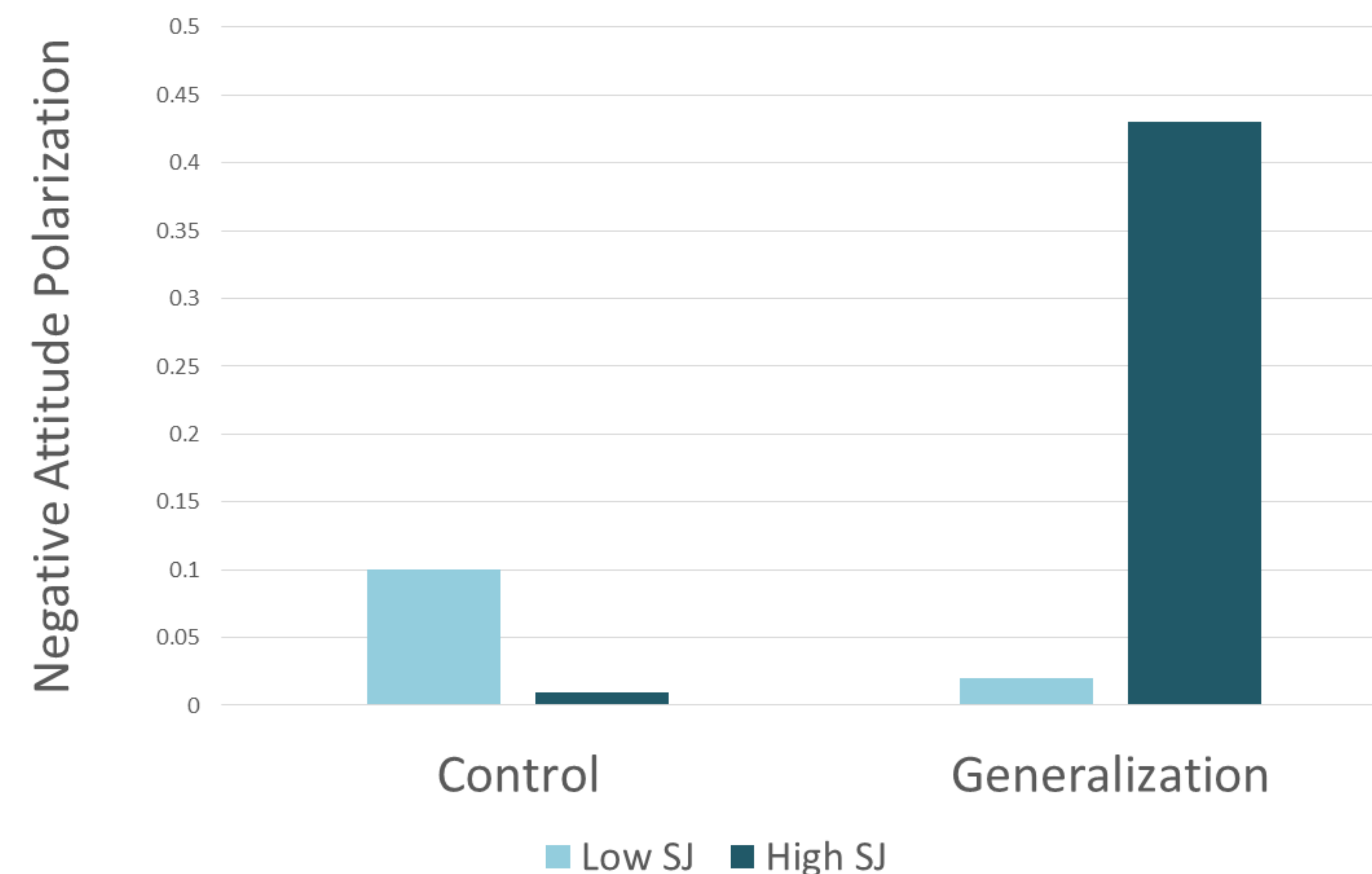"At a social event, these guys would be a bunch of Neanderthals"

Figure 1. In the control condition, neither high nor low system justifiers reported significantly more negative attitudes later than they had after first learning about the club and its traits. In the Generalization condition where participants wrote about two situations in which they imagined club member displaying those traits, high justifiers reported significantly more negative attitudes.

Results

➤ **Prediction**: Participants in the generalization condition would develop even more negative attitudes, despite being given no additional information. This effect of generalization was predicted to be greater for participants who scored high on the System Justification Scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000), who are especially likely to derogate outgroups they regard as inferior (Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004).

➤ **Initial Attitude:** On average, participants disliked the group. All participants responded that they would not want to join the group.

➤ **Analysis Performed:** In a linear regression analysis, polarization (adopting a more negative attitude at Time 2 than at Time 1) was regressed on Condition (0 = control; 1 = generalization), System Justification, and their interaction.

➤ **Results:** Polarization was greater for participants who generalized situations than for participants who spent the same amount of time doing math problems.

> ➤ In the **Generalization Condition** (N=59), high justifiers reported *significantly more* negative attitudes, even though they had not received any additional information of any kind.

> ➤ In the **Control Condition** (N = 76), *neither* high nor low system justifiers reported significantly more negative attitudes later than they had after first learning about the club and its traits.

Discussion

The participants in this study were not deranged in any way, they were ordinary Mturk workers that had no pre-existing biases as VSG #62 was a fictitious group. Our research demonstrated polarization after only 5 minutes of cross-situational generalization. Further research may seek to examine how more sessions of self-generated thoughts may lead to greater attitude polarization. It should be noted that of a large array of individual differences, only two impacted the results. Self-radicalization effects were more pronounced for people who like things the way they are and justify their in-group's place in a society (Jost & Banaji, 1994), and for people who tend to rely on top brain (frontal and parietal lobes) as opposed to bottom brain (temporal and occipital lobes) thinking (Kosslyn & Miller, 2015).

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