Who is More Violent in Extremist Groups? A Comparison of Leaders and Followers.

Katarzyna Jasko^a

Jagiellonian University

Gary LaFree^a

University of Maryland

^a Both authors contributed equally and order of authors is alphabetical.

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Abstract

Few prior studies have examined the extent to which the behavior and characteristics of political extremists are related to their position within radical groups. In this paper we concentrate on one of the most fundamental distinctions in groups: that between leaders and followers. Our main goal is to investigate the comparative propensity of leaders and followers to engage in political violence. In a sample of individuals who have committed ideologically motivated political crimes in the United States ($N = 1,331$) we found that even though leaders were more ideologically committed to the group's goals and ideologies, they were at the same time less likely to engage in violent acts. Moreover, we found that leaders in radical criminal organizations shared many characteristics with leaders in noncriminal organizations. Specifically, in comparison to followers, they were more often male, older, and they were more likely to belong to an ethnic majority. We consider implications for future research and policy of the fundamental conclusion that compared to leaders, followers in terrorist organizations are more likely to engage in violent acts.

Keywords: political violence, extremist groups, leaders, followers

Who is More Violent in Extremist Groups? A Comparison of Leaders and Followers

Although research on extremist groups has increased dramatically in recent years (Freilich & LaFree, 2017) much of it has been limited to comparisons of organizational characteristics (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008; Shapiro, 2013), or case studies of one or two terrorist groups (Holt, Freilich, Chermak, Mills, & Silva, 2018; LaFree, Dugan, & Korte, 2009; LaFree & Miller, 2008). This research has advanced our understanding of radical groups but tells us little about the heterogeneity of individuals within them when it comes to violent behavior. While organizations usually expect all group members to strive for common goals, in reality there is often wide variation across individual members' motivations, preferences, and knowledge. In the present paper, we focus on one of the most fundamental distinctions within groups: the distinction between leaders and followers. Specifically, we investigate the comparative propensity of leaders and followers in extremist groups to engage in political violence.

To that aim we examine more than a thousand individuals associated with illegal, violent and non-violent, political extremism in the United States, about a third of whom were classified as leaders and the other two-thirds as followers. We first explore whether leaders and followers in extremist groups are distinct in terms of age, gender, minority status, and socioeconomic position, all of which are characteristics associated both with leadership in mainstream organizations and propensity to use violence for political goals. We also compare leaders and followers in terms of their familiarity with violent methods and the depth of their ideological commitment to an extremist organization. We then use multivariate models to compare the engagement in political violence by leaders and followers.

Despite important research and policy implications, research on this topic is scarce. We were unable to identify a single large-N study that directly compares the individual characteristics

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of leaders and followers in extremist political organizations or considers the consequences of these differences for their violent actions. Even studies that are indirectly related to the issues of leadership in extremist organizations are generally restricted to case studies of political groups that are already committed to violence (Horgan, 2005; Sageman, 2011). While useful, such research does not answer the question of who is most likely to cross the line between radical but still non-violent action and the direct use of violence for political aims. At the same time, past research suggests that leaders and followers differ significantly in terms of their characteristics, specialized knowledge, and incentive structures within organizations and that these differences are important for explaining their respective behaviors. We examine this issue next.

Group Role and Propensity to Use Violence

There are several reasons to expect that the incentives of leaders to engage in violent actions are indeed weaker than the incentives of followers for such actions (Abrahms & Potter, 2015; Shapiro & Siegel, 2012). First, due to their position within the group, compared to followers, leaders have a more complete understanding of long-term organizational goals and better recognition of appropriate means for attaining them (Greenwald, 2007; Von Krogh et al., 2012). By contrast, followers who eventually execute actions may hold opinions and personal goals that are less closely aligned than leaders with the overall mission of the organization. Given that violence often provides immediate, sometimes dramatic consequences, followers may be more inclined to prioritize short-term gains from violent attacks over long-term losses of which they might not be fully aware. The superior knowledge of leaders means that they are likely more skilled than followers at choosing appropriate means for achieving organizational objectives including decisions about violent tactics. In short, concerns about alienating civilian populations, especially those that are supportive or at least neutral toward the goals of the

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organization may predispose leaders to keep violence levels down and in particular to avoid striking civilian targets (Rosendorff & Sandler, 2010).

Second, because leaders are more likely than followers to have a longer tenure within the organization (Greenwald, 2007; Martin, Guillaume, Thomas, Lee, & Epitropaki, 2016), they are also more likely than followers to have personally observed the strategic costs of indiscriminant bloodshed and consequently may be less supportive of violent actions than their less experienced followers. Research suggests that if political groups focus on long-term objectives they are less likely to engage in violent actions because unconstrained violence is often detrimental to their goals (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Leaders may be more likely to recognize this dynamic and therefore be less likely than followers to use violence as a tactic.

Finally, compared to leaders, followers may have more to gain personally from engaging in violent action. Because violence attracts attention to its perpetrators, violent actions likely make perpetrators feel noticed and powerful, which can make it an appealing behavior to individuals who otherwise feel ignored and insignificant (Jasko, LaFree & Kruglanski, 2016; Kruglanski et al., 2017). Thus, followers may be psychologically incentivized for committing violent attacks to the extent that such attacks increase their prestige both within and outside of the group (Bloom, 2004). If perpetrating violence is a means to gain respect and status, then we can think of leaders as those who have already partially satisfied those goals. As leaders already command a certain amount of respect because of their position in the group, they have less to gain from additional engagement in violence. By contrast, followers may feel they need to prove their commitment to the cause and to the group and may thus expect greater psychological rewards from violent actions.

However, while the abovementioned arguments suggest that leaders are less likely to engage in violence than followers, the literature on power and leadership offers several

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compelling counter arguments. First, leaders occupy their position in part because they are prototypical figures in their respective groups (Hogg & Reid, 2006), establishing and personifying group values, norms, and goals (Hains, Hogg, & Duck, 1997; Haslam & Platow, 2001). Assuming that in extremist groups violence as a means for attaining political goals is a more normative choice than in mainstream political organizations, it could be that leaders of extremist groups are in fact more likely than followers to justify, support, and directly engage in violent actions. In a similar way to how criminal gangs operate (Benavides et al., 2016; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2017), leaders of extremist political groups may be those individuals who are the most eager to use violence. If leaders are more ideologically committed than followers to the political objectives they see for the group, they may also be more willing to use whatever means they perceive as necessary to pursue them, including violence.

Second, leaders may not only be more motivated to pursue group goals but they may also be more psychologically capable than followers to commit violent acts. Engagement in political violence is counter-normative and perpetrators of such acts are disavowed by most members of society. Even when violence is committed in the service of deeply held ideological convictions, it still imposes major psychological costs on individuals (Fiske & Rai, 2014; Littman & Paluck, 2015). Given that it is psychologically difficult to kill or injure another person, some aspects of a high-status position may make this task easier for leaders than for followers. For example, prior research shows that compared to the less powerful, more powerful individuals are less empathetic (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006) and more likely to dehumanize (Gwinn, Judd, & Park, 2013) and objectify others (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008). These effects of power may reduce the psychological costs of violence by changing the perpetrator's perception of victims. More generally, leaders are typically accorded "idiosyncrasy credits" either due to their perceived service to the group or because of their authority (Hollander, 1958). Taken together,

the sense of power, entitlement, and uniqueness leaders experience due to their position may free them from constraints other group members experience when faced with a choice to engage in violence.

Empirical Evidence

The empirical evidence attesting to a link between leadership and political violence is scarce, indirect, and restricted to limited samples and social contexts. One line of research relevant to our questions investigates the effects of targeted killings on subsequent violence perpetrated by terrorist groups. In response to the growing prevalence of this strategy by the United States, several studies have examined whether “decapitating” the leaders of militant groups is strategically effective. On balance, some recent research, both case studies (Byman, 2013; Donovan & Coupe, 2013) and quantitative analysis (Price, 2012; Wilner, 2010) concludes that targeted assassinations or the removal of leaders by other means can reduce the ability of terrorist organizations to mount further strikes. For example, in a study of Pakistan from 2007 to 2011, Johnston and Sarbahi (2016) found that drone strikes were significantly associated with decreases in the incidence and lethality of terrorist attacks. Similarly, Johnston (2012) finds that insurgencies are more likely to end, and insurgent attacks are likely to decrease, after a successful strike on its leadership. These studies conclude that leadership removal generally diminishes organizational violence over the long term. However, these results do not tell us whether compared to followers, leaders are more prone to violence, or whether organizations without leaders are simply less effective in general. Moreover, some research looking at the consequences of decapitation reaches different conclusions. For example, Abrahms and Mierau (2017) found that in the immediate aftermath of drone strikes aimed at neutralizing the leadership of terrorist groups, attacks moved from military to civilian targets, effectively increasing their overall lethality. The authors interpret this result as evidence that compared to higher-level group

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members, lower-level members of organizations who take over leadership roles after targeted killings are more prone to use violence. In one of the few studies that examined these processes in non-Islamist groups, Asal, Chermak, Fitzgerald, and Freilich (2016) found that right-wing extremist organizations were more likely to use violence if they had weak or decentralized leadership.

While these studies are relevant to our research questions, they nonetheless suffer from several limitations. First, most studies to date have been restricted to terrorist violence based on religious extremism and do not necessarily generalize to extremism motivated by other types of ideologies. Second, prior research provides only indirect evidence for the individual choices of leaders and followers, which are inferred from the overall lethality of the organization. Given that individual and organizational violence occurs on different levels of analysis, it is important to establish whether the pattern found on the organizational level is also found at the individual level. And finally, prior research has been restricted so far to violent groups and it does not compare violent to non-violent actions, the subject of the current analysis.

Overview of the Current Research

The main goal of our paper is to investigate differential engagement in violent political actions among a large sample of leaders and followers in radical groups. Data are drawn from a newly available individual-level database, Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS; Jensen, James, & Tinsley, 2015; LaFree et al., 2018). The dataset is based on publicly available sources and contains background, demographic, group affiliation and contextual information for a sample of individuals who radicalized in the United States from 1948 to 2016. The individuals in the database were included for committing ideologically motivated illegal violent or non-violent acts, joining a designated terrorist organization, or associating with an organization whose leader(s) has/have been indicted of an ideologically

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motivated violent offense. We define these cases as “domestic radicalization” in that most or all of the individuals’ radicalization occurred while they were residing in the United States.

Our main focus is the relationship between group role and engagement in violence. However, as there are several variables that may be correlated both with the role occupied by individuals within groups and their propensity to use violence, we include them as control variables. Individuals are more likely to occupy leadership positions in any organization when they embody the stereotypical characteristics of leaders. Thus, leaders are more often men than women (Eagly & Carli, 2004) and they more often belong to ethnic majority rather than to minority groups (Elliott & Smith, 2004; Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008). There is also evidence suggesting that leaders are older (Walter & Scheibe, 2013), more educated (Howard & Bray, 1988), and of higher socioeconomic status (Martin, Innis, & Ward, 2017) than their subordinates. To the extent that the same characteristics that confer greater status or power on leaders than followers within conventional organizations also operate within clandestine groups engaged in politically motivated extremism, we expect that compared to followers, leaders in extremist groups are more likely to be male and older, to have higher educational attainment and socio-economic status, and are less likely to be members of minority groups or immigrants.

As previously noted, leaders may be more violent than followers if their greater commitment to the ideological goals motivates them to use whatever means they might consider necessary, violence included. A major defining feature of leadership is to serve as the embodiment of the organization, personifying group values, norms, and goals (Drake, 1998; Crenshaw, 1988; Abrahams & Potter, 2015). They should therefore exhibit a stronger ideological commitment and have experienced a longer period of radicalization to political extremism. Moreover, to the extent that they are likely more experienced in using violence in the past, leaders may also be more likely to use it for political goals once they find themselves in extremist

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groups. To measure this, we concentrate on two background experiences that while differing a great deal, nonetheless both provide training and experience in the use of violence: a criminal record for violence and military experience. We expect that compared to followers, leaders will have more training and experience in the use of violence.

To sum up, we expect that there will be significant differences between leaders and followers with respect to demographic characteristics that are typically associated with power in law-abiding organizations. We also expect leaders to have more violence-related experience in the past and predict that compared to followers, they will be more ideologically committed and will go through a longer radicalization period. Moreover, to the extent that followers feel neglected due to their belonging to marginalized social groups or they desire to feel more significant because of their greater frustrations in personal life they may be incentivized to engage in radical actions that bring them significance. The dataset we used to investigate our research question contained variables that allow us to control for these alternative explanations. Given that these differences may also contribute to engagement in political violence, we treat them as control variables in our multivariate models.

Method

Dataset

Data were collected in four waves between January 2013 and June 2017. The research team began by reviewing the publicly available sources, including court documents, online news articles, newspaper archives, open-source non-government reports, unclassified government reports (e.g., annual FBI terrorist reports), and existing terrorism-related datasets (e.g., the Global Terrorism Database). The team assessed cases for inclusion based on the following criteria: (1) the individual radicalized while living in the United States, (2) the individual espoused or currently espouses ideological motives, and (3) the individual showed evidence that their

behavior was linked to the ideological motives they espoused. The PIRUS dataset consists of 1,865 cases and close to 150 variables. The sample for the current paper was limited to 1,311 individuals with detailed information about whether they were widely recognized as leaders or followers within politically extremist groups. The choice of variables was determined by theoretical considerations described in the introduction. The PIRUS dataset, syntax, and analyses are available at https://osf.io/u6bwg/?view_only=3380e2899e9740e583fcc7314a2fe239.

Variables

Violence. The outcome variable was coded “1” for individuals whose earliest public exposure, that is, the action they undertook that resulted in their initial identification in public sources as an extremist, involved an act of violence or the intention to commit an act of violence. Likewise, the dependent variable was coded “0” for individuals whose earliest public exposure involved only non-violent acts. We treated as violent those cases where there was strong evidence that individuals were conspiring to kill or injure even if they failed to do so. We treated as non-violent all cases where it was clear from source documents that individuals did not intend to harm others, including acts of vandalism, illegal protest, fraud, and acts of property destruction where the perpetrators took measures to ensure that no one was injured or killed. Nearly 58% of the perpetrators in our data had committed violent acts.

Leader vs. follower. Our main predictor variable distinguished leaders and followers at the time individuals were publicly exposed for the behavior that got them into the data base. We excluded individuals who were not part of a group ($n = 332$), whose status as leaders or followers was ambiguous ($n = 108$), or who had missing values on this variable ($n = 114$). We coded this variable “1” if there was strong evidence that the individual served as a group leader and “0” if the evidence showed that the individual was a group follower. We classified 68% of the perpetrators in our study as followers and just under one-third as leaders (32%).

Demographic variables. We included five demographic measures in the analysis. *Age* is a continuous variable ($M = 33.43$, $SD = 12.86$). *Gender* is coded “2” for men and “1” for women. The sample consists of 89% men and 11% women. *Education* is coded “0” for less than high school (14%), “1” for high school (23%) and “2” for above high school (63%). *Ethnic/racial minority status* was coded “0” for whites (65%) and “1” for non-whites (35%). *Immigrant status* was coded “0” for non-immigrants (88%) and “1” for immigrants (12%).

Socio-economic variables. We include three indicators of socio-economic position. We coded *socio-economic status* “0” for high (14%), “0.5” for middle (64%), and “1” for low (22%) to interpret this variable in terms of possible economic frustration. For the same reasons *unemployment* was coded “0” for those individuals who were employed, students or retired (86%) and “1” for unemployed (14%). *Work history* was coded “0” for regularly employed (65%), “0.33” for serially employed (22%), “0.66” for under-employed (6%), and “1” for long-term unemployed (7%). We considered individuals who were working less than full-time to be under-employed and individuals who moved rapidly between jobs to be serially employed.

Past experience with violence. We included two measures to gauge familiarity of individuals with the use of violence. *Military experience* is coded “1” if the individual had military experience and “0” otherwise. *Previous criminal record* is coded “3” if there was evidence that the individual had a previous record for violent crime, “2” if the individual had a previous record for serious nonviolent crime, “1” if the individual had a previous record for non-serious nonviolent crime, and “0” if the individual had no previous criminal record. For this variable we only included non-ideologically motivated criminal activities that happened prior to the event that brought the individual into the database. Felonies were considered to be serious crimes and misdemeanors non serious. The majority of the sample (85%) did not have military experience nor did they have a previous criminal record (62%).

The extent of radicalization process. We included two variables to capture the degree of perpetrators' radicalization. *Duration of the radicalization process* is coded "0" for radicalization that lasted less than one year (16%), "1" for radicalization between 1 and 5 years (46%), and "2" for radicalization longer than five years (38%). *Length in a group* measures the amount of time (in months) the individual had been an active member of an extremist group. Because it was highly skewed we log-transformed it.

The final two variables capture the degree of radicalization of perpetrator's beliefs and behaviors. *Ideological commitment* is measured on a five-point scale that ranges from "evidence of exposure to a radical ideology," coded as "1," to "evidence of a deep commitment to a radical ideology," coded as "5." *Radical behavior* measures the maximum extent of radicalization apparent in the individual's behavior with a six-point scale ranging from "changes in lifestyle," coded "1," to "active participation in the activities of the group meant to result in casualties," coded "6." While the latter variable is closely related to our main outcome variable (i.e., Violence) it allowed us to look in greater detail at the types of radical behaviors in which individuals were engaged. However, because of its conceptual overlap with the major outcome variable we did not include it in the multivariate analyses.

The detailed coding of all variables together with descriptive statistics and the fraction of missing values is presented in Supplemental Online Materials.

Analytical Strategy

While our outcome variable (Violence) and key predictor variable (Leader vs. Follower) include no missing values, the remaining variables have a wide range of missing data. For example, three variables were missing in more than 60% of the cases. Although this situation is common in studies of political violence based on open source data (Dugan & Distler, 2016; Safer-Lichtenstein, LaFree, & Loughran, 2017), it raises obvious concerns. Simply eliminating

cases with missing data greatly reduces sample size and makes multivariate analysis difficult or impossible; nor is listwise deletion the recommended solution for handling missing data (Graham, 2009; Jellic, Phelps, & Lerner, 2009). To deal with the analytic limitations imposed by missing data we apply a multiple imputation procedure (Allison, 2001; Graham, 2009; Rubin, 1987). In this approach instead of filling in missing observations with one specific value, multiple datasets with a range of values are created. Each imputed data set is then analyzed separately and the results of these separate analyses are pooled and averaged to obtain final coefficients.

According to Graham, Olchowski, and Gilreath (2007), the optimal number of created datasets depends on the fraction of missing information. Given that we have a large amount of missing data for several of the variables included in the analysis, we created 25 datasets with imputed values. We incorporated the predictor as well as the outcome variable (i.e., Violence) in the imputation models, although we did not impute values for it. In a simulation study Moons, Donders, Stijnen, and Harrell (2006) showed that imputation of missing predictor values using the outcome is preferred over imputation without the outcome. The details of the imputation model and the results are available at

https://osf.io/u6bwg/?view_only=3380e2899e9740e583fcc7314a2fe239.

In the analysis that follows we start with bivariate comparisons between leaders and followers on propensity to use violence as well as on variables related to demographic characteristics, prior experience with violence, and the radicalization process. We next perform multivariate analysis to test the effect of leaders versus followers on use of violence while controlling for the demographic and other variables.

Results

Bivariate Analyses

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In Table 1 we show the bivariate associations between the role in the organization (Leader vs. follower) and categorical variables. These results are based only on observations before missing values were imputed.

----- Insert Table 1 -----

Violent behavior. Regarding our main hypothesis, data showed that 58% of the followers in our study were engaged in violent acts compared to 42% of leaders ($\chi^2(1, N=1331) = 32.97, p < .001$). Figure 1 provides a more detailed look at the specific types of actions in which leaders and followers were involved (i.e., *Radical behaviors*) and as with our measure of violence, shows significant differences between the two groups ($\chi^2(5, N = 1281) = 76.68, p < .001$). We found no significant differences between leaders and followers with regard to changes in life style, support, and actions that were not intended to result in casualties. However, we did find significant differences between leaders and followers in their engagement in legal activism, seeking training, and actions intending to result in casualties. Not surprisingly, in comparison to leaders, followers were nearly twice as likely to seek training (9% of followers vs. 5% of leaders). Importantly for our focal questions, whereas leaders were five times more likely than followers to engage in legal activism (16% of leaders vs. 3% of followers), they were *less* likely to engage in actions intending to result in casualties (39% of leaders vs. 48% of followers). This supports the view that compared to followers, leaders were less inclined to engage in violent actions.

----- Insert Figure 1 -----

Demographic and socio-economic variables. In support of our hypotheses, leaders were significantly older ($M = 38.16, 95\% \text{ CI } [36.94, 39.38]$) than followers ($M = 31.20, 95\% \text{ CI } [30.36, 32.04]$), $F(1,1245) = 84.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$). There were fewer women among leaders

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than among followers (6% vs. 14%; $\chi^2(1, N = 1331) = 14.92, p < .001$), as well as fewer members of racial / ethnic minorities (26% vs. 39%, $\chi^2(1, N = 1197) = 19.28, p < .001$), and fewer immigrants (9% vs. 14%, $\chi^2(1, N = 1223) = 6.01, p = .014$). However, contrary to our hypotheses, leaders and followers were not significantly different in their education level ($p = .489$), socioeconomic status ($\chi^2(2, N = 632) = 1.41, p = .494$), employment situation ($p = .530$), or work history ($p = .206$).

Previous experience with violence. In support of our predictions, leaders more often than followers had previous military experience (24% vs. 11%; $\chi^2(1, N = 864) = 27.14, p < .001$) and they were more likely to have been engaged in violent criminal activity in the past (23% vs. 15%; $\chi^2(3, N = 687) = 13.51, p = .004$).

Radicalization process. In line with our predictions, the duration of time between the first evidence of radicalization and exposure was shorter for followers than for leaders ($\chi^2(2, N = 589) = 38.95, p < .001$). While only 10% of leaders radicalized in less than a year, the same was true for twice as many followers (20%). Furthermore, the proportion was reversed among those whose radicalization period was longer than 5 years: 54% of leaders and 29% of followers radicalized over that time period. Leaders had also been in their groups for longer ($M = 4.08$, 95% CI [3.90, 4.27]) than followers ($M = 3.04$, 95% CI [2.89, 3.19]), $F(1,474) = 74.17, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .14$). Taken together these results support the conclusion that leaders go through a longer radicalization process than followers.

Finally, also in support of our expectations, leaders were more ideologically committed than followers ($\chi^2(4, N = 1197) = 67.33, p < .001$). While more leaders (74%) than followers (53%) exhibited deep commitment to ideology, this proportion was reversed in the category of

individuals who were simply exposed to an ideological message. Here, 14% of followers vs. 5% of leaders were classified as belonging to that category.

Multivariate Analyses

To test the relation between the perpetrator's role in a radical group and their engagement in violence we conducted a hierarchical logistic regression analysis on the multiple datasets with imputed missing values. The results of these analyses, pooled across all datasets, are presented in Table 2. We begin with Model 1 that included only the Leader vs. Follower variable. Table 2 shows that for leaders the odds of a violent versus non-violent attack were lower than the same odds for followers ($B = -0.68$, $SE = 0.12$, $OR = 0.51$, 95% CI [0.40, 0.64], $p < .001$). This effect remained significant after we controlled for demographic variables (gender, age, education, minority status, immigrant; Model 2), individual's prior criminal and military experiences (Model 3), and radicalization period and the length of time staying in the group (Model 4).

----- Insert Table 2 -----

Out of the demographic variables (Model 2) only minority status and gender were significantly related to violence. For individuals who belonged to ethnic or racial minorities the odds of a violent versus non-violent attack were three times higher than the same odds for non-minorities ($B = 1.10$, $SE = 0.17$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 3.00$, 95% CI [2.15, 4.20], $p < .001$). Men were more likely than women to commit violent vs. non-violent acts as well ($B = 0.52$, $SE = 0.22$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.68$, 95% CI [1.08, 2.61], $p = .020$). These two variables were also consistently significant in Models 3 and 4. In Model 3 we added the measures of familiarity with the use of violence. The results show that in comparison to having committed no previous criminal activity, having committed violent crime in the past was positively associated with relative preference for violent over non-violent actions ($B = 0.92$, $SE = 0.29$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 2.51$, 95% CI [1.39, 4.51], $p = .003$). Finally, in Model 4 we added the time length of being a group member and the radicalization

period. While the latter variable was not significantly related to violence, individuals with more time belonging to a group were less likely to choose violent actions ($B = -0.21$, $SE = 0.10$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.81$, 95% CI [0.67, 0.98], $p = .029$). Importantly, even after including all these variables in the model, the effect of leadership position remained significant and in the predicted direction ($B = -0.54$, $SE = 0.15$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.58$, 95% CI [0.43, 0.79], $p < .001$).

Additional Analyses

As a robustness check, we ran a separate analysis using the same set of predictors, which additionally included ideological commitment added in the last step. Ideological commitment was treated as a categorical variable with the last category (i.e., deep commitment to ideology) as a reference category. Since we did not impute missing values for ideological commitment the dataset was reduced to 1,197 cases. Ideological commitment was positively related to violence with deep commitment being related to the highest odds of violent vs. non-violent behavior. However, after including this variable in the model the results for our focal variable – being a leader vs. follower – did not change.

Even though variables related to frustrations in the work domain (i.e., socio-economic status, unemployment, work history) did not differentiate between leaders and followers, past research using the PIRUS database (Jasko et al., 2017; LaFree et al. 2018) demonstrated that they were positively related to likelihood of violence. Therefore, we ran an additional analysis, in which the composite index of the three variables was included as a covariate. Replicating the analyses reported previously, the index was a positive predictor of violence but it did not change our focal estimate regarding the group role. We include these additional analyses at https://osf.io/u6bwg/?view_only=3380e2899e9740e583fcc7314a2fe239.

General Discussion

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The goal of the present study was to investigate the relationship between the individual's group role and the use of violence for political aims. Drawing on several theoretical perspectives we tested the hypothesis that compared to followers, leaders of radical political groups would be less likely to engage in ideologically motivated violence. Based on prior research we also considered the possibility that because of lower psychological constraints and greater access to relevant skills leaders may instead be more violent than followers. We also compared leaders and followers with regard to demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, familiarity with violence, and their radicalization experiences. To test our hypotheses, we used a dataset on political extremists who radicalized in the United States to the point of committing an illegal crime. Given that existing research on political extremism focuses predominantly on groups or events, a strength of the PIRUS dataset was that it contained information about behavioral data collected on the individual level. Moreover, the database covered a wide variety of illegal violent and non-violent actions, which is important because most prior studies on radical individuals and groups are limited to those who have already committed violent acts. The decision to use violence may be motivated by different factors than the decision to escalate it after an individual has already entered a violent path. Our results provide several major conclusions about differences between leaders and followers in clandestine organizations.

First, regarding their demographic profiles, the results showed that leaders in radical groups were more often male, older, and they were more likely to belong to an ethnic majority than a minority. These results are generally consistent with the conclusion that many of the same attributes that contribute to obtaining a leadership position in a mainstream social group are also positively related to being a leader in an extremist political group (Ligon, Harms & Derrick, 2015). However, contrary to prior research, leaders were not significantly more educated or of higher economic status than followers. Thus, not all signs of status that generally confer

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leadership status in mainstream organizations work in the same way in clandestine organizations. This could mean that some demographic status signals (i.e., gender, age, race, ethnicity) are more universal while the value of others (i.e., education, social class) are more context-dependent.

Second, in comparison with followers, leaders were more deeply involved in clandestine organizations measured by the time they stayed with the group and their level of ideological commitment. This is in line with the expectation that leaders are more familiar with the ultimate objectives of their group and more knowledgeable about the organization's major political goals and ideology. It also confirms the theoretical approach that presents leaders as prototypical figures in their groups (Basadur, 2004; Edmondson 2003; Von Krogh et al. 2012). One implication of this research is that policies regarding individuals who belong to politically extremist groups cannot assume that all members will behave in the same way. For example, policies aimed at encouraging desistance may require different strategies for leaders, with a high level of ideological commitment, compared to followers.

However, even though leaders were more ideologically committed to the group's goals and ideologies, with regard to our primary variable of interest, use of violence, we found that they were at the same time *less* likely to engage in violent acts. These results obtained on the individual level support prior research on groups and organizations (Abrahms & Potter, 2015; Shapiro & Siegel, 2012) suggesting that leaders, in comparison to followers, have fewer incentives to perpetrate violence. As we argued above, several variables may motivate followers to engage in violent actions. Followers may engage in violent actions because of their imperfect understanding of the group's position, privileging immediate effects over long-term strategic consequences. Followers may believe that violence is an effective means in a given situation even though a more complex assessment may prompt a different course of action. The rewards from violence that followers expect may also differ from those that leaders can expect. To the extent

that violent action is associated with power and dominance it may be more appealing to followers than leaders. In short, in comparison to leaders, followers may have more to gain personally from violent action. However, if leaders are less motivated than followers to engage and approve of organizational violence then agency problems might arise within political groups. Specifically, due to followers' actions an overall image of those groups may become more violent than what leaders desire for their organization. In the long run, radicalization of a subset of individuals within the group might lead to splinters. Indeed, research shows that extremist organizations that use violence as a tactic are at a greater risk of splitting (Asal, Brown, & Dalton, 2012). Greater ideological commitment of leaders than followers may contribute to such tensions as well if it causes misunderstandings regarding the specific goals for which the group should strive. Generally, the results of the present study can inform both theoretical and practical aspects of intragroup processes that political groups might find challenging.

Limitations and Alternative Explanations

While reliance on behavioral data has many advantages, one weakness is that based on such data we were unable to directly measure motivations behind behaviors. Therefore, there might be alternative explanations of the behavioral patterns that we observed. Perhaps the most obvious alternative explanation is that leaders are not less motivated to use violence in general but they are simply less likely to perform such actions themselves. Because they are in a position of power they can command other people to execute such actions. This does not necessarily mean that they do not approve of such actions. It is a strong alternative explanation and we cannot rule it out directly. However, if it is the case we might expect that leaders will also be more likely to send operatives to perform the next most extreme action included in our database (i.e., participation in actions *not* intending to result in casualties). Engagement in such actions could also lead to severe legal consequences that could terminate the leader's presence in the group.

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However, in an analysis of these actions we did not find any significant differences between leaders and followers. This finding suggests that leaders are not less likely to engage in all risky actions but they are more reluctant to engage in risky actions that specifically involve violence.

Another possible explanation for our results is selection bias. It seems probable that compared to followers, leaders are better known to law enforcement agencies. Therefore, leaders may get into the database earlier in their radicalization process because their illegal behaviors are identified sooner even when those behaviors are non-violent. On the other hand, as long as followers do not engage in violent crime they are less likely to be noticed by police and appear in our database. However, this seems to be an unlikely explanation given that leaders were longer engaged in their respective groups than followers were. Therefore, they were probably faced with temptations to use violent means more often than their followers who remained in the groups on average for a shorter period of time. Interestingly, leaders do not appear to be less violent than followers in general. In fact, they were more likely to have a violent criminal record and they were more likely to have had military experience which suggests that they did not avoid contact with violence in the past. While not conclusive, this evidence supports the interpretation that it is their lower motivation to engage in violence instead of other variables such as general avoidance of aggressive tactics, that explains the observed difference in the use of violence.

Future Directions

To shed light on the process through which leaders and followers make decisions about the use of political violence, future research could investigate mediating factors between group role and the choice of specific tactics. One possible variable could be perceived effectiveness of violence as a tactic. Typically, aggression is perceived as abusive and counterproductive group behavior. In this regard, extremist groups offer an interesting social context because in such groups violence could potentially be perceived as an instrumental means to pursue goals of the

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group. The extent to which leaders and followers differ in their perceptions of how useful violence is to pursue group goals could explain the differences we found in the present study. Future research (e.g., employing multilevel analysis) might also benefit from a more in-depth examination of the relationship between leaders and followers within specific organizations (e.g., al-Qaeda, the Weather Underground). However, the challenge here is that even with relatively high profile organizations, sample sizes for specific organizations are too small to make meaningful quantitative comparisons. Similarly, qualitative case studies of leaders and followers within the same organization could be useful.

To sum up, few prior studies have examined the extent to which the behavior of political extremists is affected by their location within clandestine groups. While groups generally encourage members to support the same goals the location of individuals within organizations may be related to their individual motivations and behaviors. In our analysis of leaders and followers within extreme political organizations we find convincing evidence that leaders in such groups share many (but not all) characteristics with leaders in mainstream, noncriminal organizations. We also find that controlling for a wide variety of other variables, in comparison to followers, leaders are more committed to ideological goals of their group but they are less likely to use violent means to pursue those goals. More generally, our results suggest that to some extent clandestine organizations may experience some of the same internal processes as legally constituted organizations. When dealing with organizations that engage in actions like suicide bombings and beheadings that violate widely held norms for human conduct, it may be important not to jump to the conclusion that these groups therefore do not follow any of the other regularities associated with the creation and maintenance of social organizations in general.

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Table 1

Bivariate associations between the role in the group (Leader vs. Follower) and the categorical variables (*Phi* coefficients).

	<i>Leader vs. Follower</i>
Violence	-.16***
<i>Demographic variables</i>	
Gender	.11***
Education	.05
Ethnic / racial minority	-.13***
Immigrant	-.07*
<i>Socio-economic variables</i>	
Socio-economic status	.05
Unemployment	.03
Work history	.09
<i>Past experience with violence</i>	
Military experience	.18***
Previous criminal activity	.14**
<i>Radicalization process</i>	
Duration of radicalization	.26***
Ideological commitment	.24***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Logistical regression of violent political behavior.

	<i>Model 1</i>			<i>Model 2</i>			<i>Model 3</i>			<i>Model 4</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>
Constant				0.29	0.31	1.34	0.21	0.34	1.23	0.48	0.44	1.62
Leader vs. Follower	-0.68	0.1	0.51^{***}	-0.59	0.13	0.55^{**}	-0.68	0.14	0.51^{**}	-0.54	0.15	0.58^{**}
	2					*			*			*
Age				-0.01	0.0	1.00	-0.01	0.01	0.99	-0.01	0.01	1.00
					1							
Gender				0.55	0.20	1.73 ^{**}	0.45	0.21	1.57 [*]	0.52	0.22	1.68 [*]
Education (1)				-0.03	0.30	0.97	-0.08	0.33	0.93	-0.18	0.34	0.84
Education (2)				-0.70	0.28	0.50 [*]	-0.58	0.32	0.56 [*]	-0.68	0.34	0.51
Ethnicity				1.01	0.16	2.76 ^{**}	1.06	0.16	2.87 ^{**}	1.10	0.17	3.00 ^{**}
						*			*			*
Immigration				0.06	0.23	1.06	0.16	0.23	1.17	0.11	0.24	1.11
Military Experience							0.41	0.21	1.51	0.38	0.22	1.47
Criminal Activity (1)							0.01	0.31	1.01	-0.06	0.32	0.94
Criminal Activity (2)							0.20	0.30	1.02	-0.05	0.29	0.95
Criminal Activity (3)							0.92	0.27	2.51 ^{**}	0.92	0.29	2.51 ^{**}
Duration (1)										0.48	0.27	1.61
Duration (2)										0.26	0.37	1.30
Group length (log)										-0.21	0.10	0.81 [*]

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Figure 1. Distribution of radical behaviors among leaders and followers.