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Propaganda as Architecture: How Ideological Systems Contract Recursive Depth

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**Abstract**

*This article applies a cognitive-architectural framework of recursive reinterpretation, developed in prior work on self, ego, and identity, to the analysis of ideological propaganda and deradicalization. That prior work established that self, ego, and identity function primarily as systems for resource-efficient learning through recursive reinterpretation of finite biographical experience, with inversion (Differenza Inversa), the reversal of an existing self-structure asymmetry to generate a new vantage point, proposed as the fundamental operator [1].*

*I identify five inhibitory mechanisms: saturation of inversion space, blockage of spiral temporality, substitution of inversion with reflection, colonization of the shadow, and selective punishment of identity-incompatible inversions. Together these amount to a model of propaganda as recursive depth reduction. The deradicalization implications follow directly: standard counter-narrative approaches fail not because they are badly designed but because they address belief content while the architectural damage that prevents belief revision goes unrepaired. A four-phase recursive restoration model is developed, sequencing architectural repair against established clinical and social psychological resources. A research programme of four falsifiable hypotheses closes the paper, connecting the theoretical account to experimental paradigms in cognitive, political, and clinical psychology.*

**Keywords:** Propaganda, Deradicalization, Recursive Depth, Identity Imposition, Inversion, Differenza Inversa, Learnable Theory, Shadow, Inversion Space, Counter-Narrative

**1. Introduction: The Architectural Question Propaganda Research has not yet Asked**

Research on propaganda is a mature field, and political psychology sits at its centre. From Adorno and colleagues' (1950) foundational work on the authoritarian personality to Jost and colleagues' (2003) meta-analytic synthesis of motivated social cognition, the discipline has built a sophisticated account of who is susceptible to ideological messaging and why [2,3]. Political psychologists have documented the personality dispositions that predict susceptibility to authoritarian messaging [4,5]. Significance quest theory has illuminated why identity threat opens individuals to radical recruitment [6]. Radicalization researchers have mapped the pathway from ordinary grievance to ideological violence [7,8]. Deradicalization practitioners have accumulated decades of case evidence about what works and what does not. The field is neither uninformed nor unsophisticated.

One question has gone largely unasked. Nearly all of this research investigates propaganda at the level of content: what messages are delivered, what emotions they recruit, what beliefs they install. The implicit model is substitution: old beliefs displaced by new ones, a fragile identity replaced by a strong one. The treatment logic that follows mirrors the diagnosis: counter-narratives, alternative identities, rehabilitative belief packages.

That model may be missing something structural. This paper argues that propaganda's most durable effect is not what it puts into a person but what it takes away: the capacity to recursively reinterpret one's own experience. A person who can still reinterpret their past, who can revisit a formative memory from a new vantage point, flip the directionality of a self-event relationship, and generate a genuinely different meaning from the same biographical anchor, can eventually exit any imposed identity, because they can see through it from a perspective it did not anticipate. A person whose recursive capacity has been systematically contracted cannot do

this, not because they lack the intelligence or the motivation, but because the cognitive architecture required for the operation has been disabled.

This is the architectural question propaganda research has not yet asked: not “what does propaganda install?” but “what does it disable?” The present paper develops a framework for answering it, grounding the analysis in a cognitive-architectural account of identity developed elsewhere and extending it into the political psychology and social identity literatures [1].

Section 2 sets out the cognitive-architectural framework on which the argument rests. Section 3 develops the inhibition hypothesis. Section 4 analyses the five mechanisms through which propaganda contracts recursive depth. Section 5 asks who is most vulnerable, connecting the framework to existing research on authoritarian susceptibility and significance quest theory. Section 6 develops the deradicalization model. Section 7 presents four falsifiable hypotheses.

## 2. The Cognitive-Architectural Framework

Magni (in press) proposes that self, ego, and identity function primarily as systems for resource-efficient learning. The core claim is that a biologically finite system, one bounded by limited neural storage, metabolic cost, and coordination demands across multiple subsystems, can generate open-ended learnability if it possesses the capacity for recursive reinterpretation: the capacity to revisit a finite set of biographical experiences from ever-deepening vantage points, generating new meaning without new biographical content. The key operation is inversion (*Differenza Inversa*): the reversal of an existing asymmetry within the self-structure (self/other, past/present, figure/ground) to produce a new vantage point. Each inversion generates a new representation of the same biographical anchor without requiring the storage of a wholly new memory. The system is more storage-efficient, more energy-efficient, and better coordinated than purely additive learning precisely because it exploits structure already present rather than creating structure from scratch.

Three constructs are distinguished within the reinterpretive architecture. The self is the perspectival field in which memories are held as mutually implicating points connected by perspective, time, and role: the substrate that makes inversion possible. The ego is the operator that performs inversion: not a homunculus but the set of transformational capacities through which reinterpretation is enacted. Identity is the attractor that constrains which reinterpretations count as ‘mine’ and provides the directional stability that ensures recursion deepens rather than dissipates. The paper also identifies a fourth element: the shadow: identity components that are functionally operative but outside the reach of recursive reinterpretation, either because they formed before the capacity for inversion was fully operational, or because they operate as transparent presuppositions rather than accessible content, or because the ego's operator has learned to avoid inverting certain distinctions [9]. Shadow material is not reinterpreted; it merely constrains. In the context of propaganda, shadow colonization

corresponds precisely to what Lifton (1961) called the “sacred science” of totalitarian ideologies: the set of claims treated not merely as asserted truths but as unchallengeable ground from which all other reasoning must proceed [10]. The target does not defend these claims; they do not experience them as claims at all. They function as invisible grammar, not as debatable premises.

Magni (in press) defines recursive depth ( $d$ ) as the number of reinterpretive passes performed on the same biographical event set. In the context of ideological radicalization, the difference between  $d = 1$  and  $d = 2$  is the difference between ideological capture and the capacity for critical distance. At  $d = 1$ , the radicalized individual accepts the propagandist's linear historical narrative as the only possible frame: “Our people were always oppressed by this outgroup, and therefore violence is our only historical trajectory.” The biographical anchors (the humiliations, the losses, the grievances) are accessible, but the operator  $R$  has been constrained to return a single class of output: the ideologically mandated reading. The individual can reflect on their situation at length and with apparent sophistication; they simply cannot exit the vantage point the ideology supplied. At  $d = 2$ , the individual performs a genuine structural inversion: they step outside that linear historical narrative and can examine it as a narrative rather than as reality. They can ask: “Why is this leader telling me this particular story, right now, in this way?” They can view the propagandist's motives from a critical distance. The vantage point has been reversed, not merely elaborated. A person capped at  $d = 1$  literally lacks the structural capacity to doubt the propagandist, not because they are unintelligent or uncritical, but because the cognitive operation that would make doubt possible has been disabled.

Three modes of identity change follow from this architecture. Reinterpretive change operates when inversion is applied to accessible memories: the person revisits a biographical anchor from a new vantage point, reconsolidates the memory trace, and updates the meaning without requiring new biographical experience. Impositive change operates when an external agent attributes an identity that is enforced through repeated interaction, emotional conditioning, or structural constraint. Integrative change operates when shadow material is brought into the substrate so that inversion can reach it. The present paper is primarily concerned with the conditions under which impositive change successfully disables reinterpretive change, which is what propaganda does.

## 3. Propaganda as Architecture: The Inhibition Hypothesis

The standard account of propaganda treats it as a delivery mechanism for ideological content. Effective propaganda delivers messages that are emotionally resonant, internally consistent, socially reinforced, and difficult to counter because they tap pre-existing anxieties, group loyalties, or status concerns. On this account, the antidote to propaganda is better content: more accurate information, more compelling counter-narratives, more attractive alternative identities.

The inhibition hypothesis proposed here is different. It holds that propaganda's most durable effect is not content delivery but

architectural contraction: the systematic reduction of the recursive depth available to the target. A person operating at  $d = 1$  can reflect on their beliefs but cannot genuinely question them, because questioning requires adopting a vantage point from which one's beliefs themselves become objects of reinterpretation, which is precisely  $d = 2$ . If propaganda successfully caps recursive depth at 1, the person will generate reflections that reinforce the imposed identity no matter how much information they encounter, because the operator  $R$  has been constrained to produce only one class of output.

Three persistent puzzles in deradicalization research fall into place. The first is non-responsiveness: individuals given accurate information, exposed to counter-narratives, and offered plausible alternative identities frequently do not change [11]. If the capacity for recursive reinterpretation has been disabled, new content cannot be processed in ways that challenge the imposed identity, because the operation required to generate a genuine alternative is simply not available. The information lands but cannot be used.

The second puzzle is asymmetry. Highly ideologically committed individuals typically show preserved or enhanced reinterpretive capacity within the ingroup framework while showing selectively impaired capacity for inversions directed at the outgroup or the ideology itself. The content-based account calls this motivated reasoning. The architectural account is more specific: inversion space has been saturated on the self-ideology axis while remaining open on the outgroup-threat axis. The damage has a precise location.

The third puzzle is the backfire effect. Counter-narratives that challenge an ideological identity without first restoring the capacity for inversion often produce reactance or actively entrench the position they were intended to dislodge [12,13]. A person operating at  $d = 1$  who encounters an argument against their identity can only process it through the constrained operator  $R$ . The output is confirmation. This is not irrationality; it is the architecture working as it was shaped to work.

#### 4. Five Mechanisms of Recursive Depth Reduction

How does propaganda contract recursive depth? Five mechanisms are identifiable, each targeting a different component of the reinterpretive architecture. They are not mutually exclusive and often operate simultaneously.

##### 4.1. Saturation of Inversion Space

Inversion requires asymmetries to flip. The self-structure is normally rich in asymmetries: self/other, ingroup/outgroup, past/present, figure/ground, agent/recipient [14]. Each asymmetry is a potential generative engine for new meaning. Propaganda may operate first by reducing the number of available asymmetries to two, and then by absolutely polarizing them.

The characteristic form is the rigid dichotomy: us versus them, believer versus apostate, patriot versus traitor, the pure versus the corrupt. When asymmetries are reduced to two and polarized

absolutely, inversion becomes structurally impossible. To flip the self/other asymmetry, to genuinely adopt the other's vantage point and view oneself from there, requires that the other be a person capable of having a vantage point. A dehumanized or absolutely evil other cannot be used as a genuine vantage point, because adopting their perspective would require treating them as a subject rather than an object. The inversion space around the most important asymmetries is sealed.

Research on dehumanization has documented this effect at the content level: outgroups are denied the attributes of full humanity [15,16]. What has been less noted is the cognitive function this serves. Dehumanization is not only about licensing violence, though it does that. It seals the inversion space around the most consequential asymmetry in the ideology. A dehumanized other cannot serve as a genuine vantage point, because adopting their perspective would require treating them as a subject. Remove that possibility and the target cannot exit the imposed identity by reasoning outward from the other's point of view.

##### 4.2. Blockage of Spiral Temporality

Recursive reinterpretation depends on what Magni (in press) calls spiral time: the capacity to return to the same biographical event from ever-deepening vantage points, with each revisitation enabled by the previous ones [1]. A memory from age twenty can be revisited at forty from a vantage point that twenty-year-old self did not have, and the revisitation itself becomes available for further reinterpretation at sixty. Spiral time makes the past a permanently renewable resource for meaning.

Propaganda may operate on temporality in two complementary directions. Looking backward, it fixes the meaning of the past once and for all: "Our people were always oppressed by theirs" or "The glorious tradition has always been thus." Past events are assigned interpretations that are declared permanent and immune to revision. The biographical anchors remain accessible, but the operator  $R$  has been constrained to return a single value: the ideologically mandated reading.

Looking forward, propaganda may impose a linear and irreversible temporality: "History has already decided" or "The future is written." This forecloses temporal inversion: the operation of reinterpreting the present from the vantage point of an imagined future self. A person who cannot ask "What would a future version of me, who has built something beyond this ideology, make of my current commitments?" cannot initiate the temporal inversion that is one of the most powerful routes to  $d = 2$ . When the future is already determined, the future self required for temporal inversion does not exist as a genuinely open possibility.

##### 4.3. Substitution of Inversion with Reflection

Reflection and inversion are related but structurally different operations. Reflection turns the self back on its own contents: the self examines its beliefs, feelings, and memories. It is cognitively demanding and can produce genuine insight. But reflection tends to consolidate rather than transform, because the vantage point of

the examination is the same as the vantage point of the contents being examined. I reflect on my belief from within my belief system. Inversion, by contrast, reverses the directionality of a self-event asymmetry: I view my belief from outside the belief system, from a structurally distinct vantage point. The distinction parallels Gross's (1998) differentiation between antecedent-focused and response-focused emotion regulation: strategies that reframe a situation before a response has fully formed operate on a different point in the process than strategies that manage a response after it already exists. Reflection, on this analogy, works on an already-formed construal; inversion changes the antecedent vantage point itself [17].

Propaganda may actively promote reflection while systematically discouraging inversion. The characteristic form is a combination of intensive self-examination (criticism and self-criticism sessions, group confession and testimony, detailed accounting of one's ideological purity) with categorical prohibition of the one operation that would generate genuine distance: perspective reversal. "Do not put yourself in the enemy's shoes." The result is a system that appears to encourage critical reflection while actually preventing the only form of reflection that could challenge the imposed identity. The target may believe they are exercising independent critical thought, while in fact they are only iterating within the attractor the ideology has established.

It explains something otherwise puzzling: heavily indoctrinated individuals often have sophisticated internal analyses of their situation. They argue, they debate, they identify apparent inconsistencies in the outgroup's position. The ideology actively cultivates this capacity. What they cannot do is view the ideological system itself from a vantage point the system did not supply. The critical faculty has been redirected inward and blocked outward.

#### 4.4. Colonization of the Shadow

The shadow, as defined by Magni (in press), comprises identity components that are functionally operative but outside the reach of recursive reinterpretation [1]. These components operate as transparent presuppositions: the medium through which experience is structured rather than the content of experience. Because they are never surfaced as objects of reflection or inversion, they cannot be questioned. The person does not notice them as assumptions; they seem simply to be the way things are.

Propaganda may not merely leave the shadow undisturbed. It may actively colonize it, placing the most inversion-threatening presuppositions specifically within the shadow, so that they become transparent. The target who has been told since early childhood that their group is the victim of a centuries-old conspiracy does not experience this as a belief that could be examined and inverted; they experience it as background reality, the frame within which all other beliefs are assessed. The presupposition is so deeply encoded that it functions not as a premise but as a grammar: invisible, structuring, and immune to the inversions that operate on the content of thought.

Lifton's (1961) study of thought reform identified this mechanism without naming it as such. The "sacred science" of ideological systems, the set of claims that are not merely asserted but treated as the unchallengeable ground from which all other reasoning proceeds, corresponds precisely to shadow colonization: the placing of key presuppositions below the threshold at which inversion could operate on them. The distinctive cognitive signature is not that the person refuses to examine these presuppositions but that they do not experience them as presuppositions at all. They are not defended; they are invisible [10].

#### 4.5. Selective Punishment of Successful Inversions

Not every inversion can be prevented by the preceding mechanisms. Some targets will, despite saturation, temporal foreclosure, and shadow colonization, succeed in performing a genuine inversion: seeing the ideology from outside, or seeing the outgroup as subjects with their own vantage points. Propaganda may address this through selective punishment.

Punishment may be explicit: violence, exclusion, labeling as traitor, apostate, or collaborator. It may be implicit: withdrawal of love, recognition, or belonging from those whose inversions lead to identity-incompatible reinterpretations. In either case, the system learns rapidly: certain inversions are dangerous. The ego's operator R undergoes a form of conditioned inhibition. Even when the inversion space is technically open and spiral time has not been completely foreclosed, the operator declines to execute certain inversions because the history of selective punishment has associated them with outcomes that the identity-as-attractor is designed to avoid.

This mechanism is particularly important for understanding the persistence of ideological commitment in individuals who no longer believe the ideology's claims at the content level. Research on totalitarian societies has repeatedly documented individuals who privately doubted the official ideology while publicly conforming and even actively enforcing it [18-20]. On the inhibition account, this pattern is not primarily cognitive dissonance but conditioned inversion suppression: the person is capable of performing the inversion but has learned not to act on it.

#### 5. Who Is Most Vulnerable: Recursive Depth as a Susceptibility Variable

If propaganda works by contracting recursive depth, then the most naturally susceptible targets are those who arrive with the lowest recursive depth. Research on political psychology and radicalization has identified several dispositions and conditions associated with heightened susceptibility: authoritarian submission and aggression, need for cognitive closure, significance quest, and identity uncertainty [4-6,21,22]. The inhibition framework proposes that what these constructs have in common is low baseline recursive depth.

Altemeyer's (1981, 1996) research on right-wing authoritarianism identified a cluster of characteristics (deference to authority, punitiveness toward deviants, conventionalism) that appeared to

cohere without a fully satisfying common explanation [4,5]. The inhibition framework offers one: a self-structure in which the inversion space has been contracted, probably by authoritarian socialization. A child raised in a highly authoritarian environment encounters selective punishment for precisely those inversions that challenge parental or institutional authority. The operator R learns to suppress them. High RWA may be, in part, the long-term cognitive residue of that early suppression, not a personality trait in the usual sense but a learned architectural constraint.

Kruglanski and colleagues' (2014) significance quest theory explains radicalization as the consequence of a threatened sense that one's life matters [6]. Radical groups offer significance restoration. The inhibition framework adds a cognitive dimension to this motivational account. Individuals whose significance has been genuinely threatened are typically in identity confusion, and identity confusion may be partly a matter of shallow recursion [23,25]. A person stuck at  $d = 1$  in relation to the events that have most damaged their significance cannot generate an alternative account of who they might become: the biographical material is there but the operation for reinterpreting it is unavailable. The ideological narrative does not replace a prior self-story; it fills a vacancy.

Hogg's (2014) uncertainty-identity theory connects self-uncertainty to identification with highly entitative groups: those with sharp boundaries, clear norms, and unambiguous prescriptions for behavior [22]. The architectural reading of this is straightforward: a person who cannot generate attractor stability through their own recursive reinterpretation, whose identity-as-attractor is weak because the inversion operator lacks the capacity to sustain it, will find in such a group a surrogate attractor. The directionality that self-generated recursion would normally provide is instead supplied by the group narrative. The group does not attract; it fills a structural gap.

A specific empirical prediction follows: individuals with lower baseline recursive depth should be more susceptible to propaganda-induced identity imposition, independently of the specific ideological content involved. Recursive depth may function as a transdiagnostic susceptibility variable, cutting across the political and religious spectrum. The measure needed is the vantage-point reversal paradigm developed by Magni (in press), and it is, in principle, deployable [1].

## 6. Deradicalization as Recursive Restoration

The inhibition framework implies a specific critique of standard deradicalization approaches and a specific proposal for what a more adequate alternative would look like.

Standard deradicalization programmes address belief content, social environment, significance threat, and psychological need through a combination of information provision, counter-narratives, vocational reintegration, and therapeutic support. They have documented success in some contexts with some individuals [6,7,26]. The results, however, are uneven and often fragile.

The inhibition account suggests, however, that they are structurally incomplete in isolation, and that the critical variable is not whether to use these approaches but when. If the primary damage propaganda inflicts is architectural (the contraction of recursive depth), then content-level approaches deployed before the architecture has been partially restored will have limited and fragile effects. A person who receives accurate information but cannot perform the inversion that would allow them to see their ideological commitments from outside will process the accurate information through the constrained operator R, which was built to return a single class of output. Counter-narratives encountered by a person at  $d = 1$  may produce reactance, backfire effects, or surface compliance masking unchanged deep structure [12,13]. The significance threat may be addressed through vocational opportunity while the recursive architecture remains flat. The individual exits the group but the cognitive machinery that made them vulnerable is still in place. What the inhibition account adds is not a competing set of tools but a sequencing logic: a specification of when content-level interventions become structurally viable, and what architectural repair must precede them for that viability to be real rather than apparent.

Recursive restoration as a deradicalization framework would prioritize the repair of the cognitive architecture over the replacement of content. Four phases can be identified, drawing on the framework developed by Magni (in press) and established clinical and social psychological resources [1].

### Phase 1: Safety and Recursive Space Creation

Before inversion training can begin, the conditions that enable inversion must exist. The most important condition is safety from selective punishment. A person who has learned through years of conditioning that performing certain inversions is dangerous will not perform them in a social environment that might still punish them. The first phase of recursive restoration is the creation of an environment in which identity-incompatible inversions are safe. This is not primarily about acceptance of the person's current beliefs; it is about establishing that the inversion operation itself, the act of seeing things from a perspective the ideology did not supply, will not result in punishment, exclusion, or withdrawal of relationship. Without this, the subsequent phases are likely to be ineffective or superficial. Standard deradicalization elements that fit naturally here include exit facilitation and relational safety work: securing physical distance from the group, connecting the individual to non-ideological social support, and addressing the immediate practical preconditions for a sustainable life outside the movement [26,27]. These elements do not require recursive capacity to be effective; they create the preconditions for its restoration.

### Phase 2: Perspective Rotation on Low-Stakes Material

Before asking individuals to perform inversions on the most heavily defended material, the core ideological commitments, recursive restoration would train the inversion operation on material that does not trigger the conditioned suppression response. The target is not to change beliefs but to restore the ego's capacity

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to execute the inversion operator. Perspective rotation exercises, systematically adopting another's vantage point in interpersonal rather than ideological contexts, practicing temporal inversion on ordinary biographical events, and examining figure-ground reversals in aesthetic and perceptual contexts, may rebuild the operator in domains where the conditioned suppression is weak. This is analogous to the principle in trauma therapy that exposure and reconsolidation should begin at the edges of the traumatic material before approaching its core. Vocational and educational reintegration programmes also have a natural home here: they restore significance and provide structured non-ideological engagement that supports the low-stakes practice of perspective rotation in everyday social and professional settings [6,11]. They do not require the individual to abandon ideological commitments directly; they simply expand the domain in which the inversion operator can be safely exercised.

### **Phase 3: Biographical Anchor Work and Spiral Revisitation**

Once the inversion operator has been partially restored through low-stakes perspective rotation, Phase 3 turns to the biographical anchors that are most entangled with the ideological identity. Typically these are the formative experiences through which the significance threat was first acutely felt and through which the ideology first made contact: the experience of humiliation that the group narrative reframed as collective victimhood, the personal failure that the ideology reinterpreted as systemic injustice, the loss that the organization named as requiring vengeance. These biographical anchors are the operational cores of the colonized shadow.

Spiral revisitation would invite the person to return to these anchors from successively deeper vantage points. The goal is not to provide a counter-narrative about what the event “really” meant: that is content substitution and will likely produce reactance. The goal is to demonstrate that the same event can generate genuinely different meanings from different vantage points, and that this is true without any of those meanings being “wrong.” The ideologically mandated interpretation is one possible meaning of the anchor, not the only possible meaning. Once this is demonstrated experientially, through the person's own successfully performed inversion, not through a facilitator's argument, the shadow colonization has been partially reversed. The presupposition has been surfaced as a presupposition.

### **Phase 4: Integration and Attractor Reconstruction**

As biographical anchors become available for multiple interpretations, the identity-as-attractor weakens. This is the intended effect, but it carries a risk: an individual whose imposed identity has been partially dissolved without any alternative attractor being available may experience genuine identity diffusion, with the associated anxiety, depression, and susceptibility documented in the identity development literature [28,29]. Phase 4 addresses this through attractor reconstruction: the gradual development of a new identity-as-attractor built not from an imposed ideological framework but from the person's own recursively generated biographical meaning-making. It is at this phase that counter-

narratives, alternative identity frameworks, and significance restoration strategies (the standard tools of deradicalization programmes) become structurally viable. A person who has recovered sufficient recursive depth to view their ideological commitments from a genuinely distinct vantage point can now engage with alternative narratives without reactance, because the inversion operator is available to evaluate them rather than simply deflecting them. Significance restoration through community reintegration, new roles, and meaningful activity can now generate genuine identity attractors rather than thin replacements [6]. This is why the sequence matters: these same interventions, applied before Phase 2 and 3, are likely to be processed through the constrained operator and produce only surface compliance or backfire. Applied after architectural repair has begun, they function as intended.

This phase is the closest to standard narrative therapy approaches, but with a crucial difference: the goal is not to provide a new life narrative but to restore the capacity to generate one [30]. The facilitator's role is not author but witness, providing the relational stability within which the person's own reinterpetive architecture can reconstitute a directional attractor from within rather than accepting one from without.

The clinical viability of this four-phase model requires systematic evaluation, and the present account is theoretical rather than empirically validated. What the inhibition framework specifically adds is the claim that the sequence matters: content-level interventions are most effective when they follow architectural repair, and existing evidence-based programmes are likely to show better outcomes when embedded within a sequencing model that prioritises recursive restoration first.

## **7. Research Programme: Four Falsifiable Hypotheses**

Four testable hypotheses follow from the inhibition account. Each specifies the independent variable, the predicted effect on recursive depth as measured by the d-score paradigm, the control conditions needed to distinguish the architectural account from simpler alternatives, and the existing experimental infrastructure on which the measurement could build.

### **7.1. The Recursive Inhibition Hypothesis**

Participants exposed to prolonged ideological propaganda should show measurably lower recursive depth (d scores) than matched non-exposed participants, controlling for verbal fluency, trait openness to experience, and crystallized intelligence. The effect should be specific to inversions that cross the self-ideology axis or the ingroup-outgroup axis, leaving unimpaired the capacity for inversions in emotionally and ideologically neutral domains. This specificity would distinguish the architectural account from a general-cognition account (propaganda makes people less smart) and from a motivated-reasoning account (propaganda makes people unwilling to think clearly about certain topics).

Measurement of d uses the vantage-point reversal paradigm developed by Magni (in press): participants provide multiple reinterpretations of standard ambiguous life events, and blinded

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coders score for structural directionality reversal rather than emotional valence or narrative elaboration. The control condition, temporal inversion prompt versus standard distanced reappraisal prompt, is designed to distinguish genuine  $d = 2$  (vantage point reversed) from articulate  $d = 1$  (same vantage point elaborated in richer vocabulary). See Magni (in press) for coding criteria [1].

A natural quasi-experimental design exists: individuals who have undergone sustained exposure to authoritarian ideological environments (cult membership, extreme political movement membership, intensive religious indoctrination) compared with matched controls. Pre-to-post designs are also feasible for measuring  $d$  score changes during participation in known indoctrination programmes or during deradicalization interventions.

### 7.2. The Asymmetric Saturation Hypothesis

Highly ideologically identified participants should show preserved or enhanced recursive depth for inversions conducted within the ingroup framework (e.g., perspective-taking between ideological factions within the group, temporal inversions about the group's future) but selectively impaired recursive depth for inversions that cross the self-ideology axis (e.g., adopting the vantage point of an outgroup member, or reinterpreting a core biographical anchor from a perspective the ideology did not supply).

The asymmetry prediction is the key discriminator between the inhibition account and simpler alternatives. A general-cognition account predicts impaired inversions everywhere. A motivated-reasoning account predicts avoidance of certain inversions when their conclusions are threatening. The inhibition account predicts that the impairment is specific to the structurally relevant inversions and is robust across motivational states: even when participants are explicitly encouraged to perform the inversion and offered material incentives for doing so, the operator is not available to execute it cleanly.

This prediction connects to existing research on integrative complexity, which has shown that ideological extremism is associated with reduced complexity of political reasoning. The inhibition account proposes that this reduction is specifically architectural: it is not that extremists are unwilling to reason complexly but that the inversion operator required for genuine perspective reversal has been constrained [31,32].

### 7.3. The Training-as-Antidote Hypothesis

Individuals who receive inversion training before exposure to ideological propaganda should show greater resistance to propaganda-induced identity imposition than untrained controls, with effects that are dose-dependent and persist over time. The training should work by raising the cost of architectural contraction: a person whose inversion operator is well-exercised requires more intensive and prolonged propaganda exposure to achieve the same degree of recursive depth reduction as a person with a naively trained operator.

The training programme would consist of a graded series of perspective rotation exercises, beginning with emotionally and ideologically neutral domains and progressively moving toward the domains most likely to trigger conditioned suppression. Measurement of resistance would use both  $d$  scores and behavioral outcomes: susceptibility to standardized persuasion paradigms, willingness to report identity-incompatible conclusions publicly, and maintenance of alternative vantage points under social pressure.

The applied implication is worth noting. If confirmed, inversion training is a structural prophylactic: it works not by teaching people what to think about any particular ideological claim but by strengthening the cognitive architecture that allows them to question claims from perspectives those claims did not supply. This is a different kind of civic education than the one typically proposed.

### 7.4. The Colonized Shadow Hypothesis

Ideological contents functioning as colonized shadow, presuppositions so deeply encoded that they are never surfaced as objects of reinterpretation, should be identifiable through paradigms measuring differential access time. The prediction is that colonized presuppositions should show significantly shorter response times on tasks requiring their application than on tasks requiring their identification as presuppositions. The individual can use the presupposition automatically but experiences friction when asked to treat it as an assumption that could be other than it is.

This paradigm adapts thinking-aloud protocols from cognitive psychology, implicit association tests, and working-memory paradigms from cognitive neuroscience. The specific adaptation required is the development of task materials that distinguish between applying a belief (which shadow colonization should leave intact or accelerate) and examining a belief as a belief (which shadow colonization should impair). The development of such materials for specific ideological domains is itself a significant methodological contribution.

The four hypotheses share a common logic. If the primary target of ideological intervention is not belief content but the recursive capacity that makes belief revision possible, then each hypothesis should obtain: depth should be measurable, its impairment specific, its training transferable, and its deepest colonized forms identifiable. Any one of them failing would require revision of the underlying account.

## 8. Conclusion: Physics Before Politics

The argument is simple enough to state, though its implications are not. Propaganda works best not when it provides the most compelling story but when it disables the cognitive machinery through which any story could be genuinely questioned. The five mechanisms identified (saturation of inversion space, blockage of spiral temporality, substitution of inversion with reflection,

colonization of the shadow, and selective punishment of successful inversions) are the tools through which that machinery is disabled. Together they constitute a coherent, architecturally unified system for the production of recursively shallow identities: identities that appear coherent and even deeply held but that are resistant to the reinterpretive operations that would allow the person to see them from outside.

The deradicalization implication is the most practically important. A deradicalization approach that replaces one identity content with another, however well-intentioned and empirically grounded, is operating on the wrong level. It provides new content to a system whose capacity for recursive reinterpretation of any content has been systematically contracted. The new content will be processed through the same constrained operator, producing the same class of outputs, in the same shallow recursion, albeit with a different ideological flavour. Durable exit from an imposed identity requires restoring the architectural capacity for inversion, not finding a better story.

That is not an argument against counter-narratives or information provision or significance restoration. It is an argument about when they are deployed. The same tools, applied after architectural repair has begun, are likely to work as intended. Applied before it, they encounter a system shaped to deflect them. The sequencing matters, and establishing it empirically is what the research programme outlined in Section 7 is for.

Some parts of a person's history, once colonized by shadow, may not be recoverable through any reinterpretive operation available to that person alone. The deepest damage propaganda inflicts may be precisely this: not what it makes people believe, but what it makes permanently unavailable for belief revision. Understanding that damage, naming it precisely, measuring it carefully, and developing the conditions under which it can be repaired, may be one of the more important questions applied psychology now faces. This paper sits where political psychology, cognitive science, and clinical practice intersect, and it cannot be otherwise: the phenomenon it addresses, the systematic disabling of the human capacity to reinterpret one's own experience, is not the property of any single field. Political psychologists will recognise the terrain: the claims here are grounded in authoritarianism research, significance quest theory, motivated cognition, and integrative complexity [2,4,5,6,31,32]. Cognitive psychologists will find the architectural constructs operationalizable through existing memory reconsolidation and reaction-time paradigms [33]. Clinical researchers will find the four-phase model explicitly sequenced against established deradicalization tools rather than proposed as a replacement for them. None of these audiences needs to accept the full theoretical architecture to find the empirical programme worth pursuing.

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