Creating a Shared Definition of Grievance: Grounded Theory of Interviews with Threat Assessment Professionals

by

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Abstract

Grievance is a foundational construct in the threat assessment and violence risk literature, yet no shared conceptual definition exists across disciplines, which limits our ability to operationalize it. This constructivist grounded theory study explored how threat assessment professionals conceptualize and implement grievance in practice through semi-structured interviews with 8 professionals. Analysis revealed a three-component definition comprising a perceived personal harm, unfairness, or conflict; dissatisfaction or anger directed toward a specific target; and the potential to motivate behavior. Four associated features, how consuming the grievance is, the individual's capacity to adjust, behavioral reinforcement, and perceived threat to their way of life, were identified as relevant to monitoring intensity and informing management. Clarifying the construct would facilitate interdisciplinary communication and improve consistency in risk assessment and case formulation.

Keywords: grievance; threat assessment; conceptual definition

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Preface

Research Ethics approval was obtained from the SFU Research Ethics Board, Simon Fraser University, Primary Investigator: Professor Kevin S. Douglas, Ph.D., JD, Student Role: Whitney Hintz, Project title: Creating a shared definition of grievance: Grounded theory of interviews with threat assessment professionals and clinicians, (REB # 30003209).

Chapter 1.

Creating a Shared Definition of Grievance: Grounded Theory of Interviews with Threat Assessment Professionals

Laypeople often use the term "grievance" to describe a complaint when they feel wronged. Most reactions to feeling wronged are fairly inconsequential to the offending party. However, not all individuals react reasonably, and may develop a strongly held belief that leads them to act in a maladaptive or even violent way.

In the field of threat assessment, grievances are an important motivation for some violence. The grievances that threat assessment professionals (i.e., people whose work involves threat assessment or violence risk assessment) interact with are viewed as more intense than pedestrian grudges or desires for justice. These grievances can be a core motivator for violent behavior, often referred to as grievance-fueled violence (Brooks & Barry-Walsh, 2022).

Grievances are frequently referred to in the literature as an initial motivation and perpetuating factor that leads to violence; however, at present, threat assessment professionals do not have an adequate shared conceptual definition that clarifies what criteria constitute a grievance. Existing definitions refer to a variety of factors that are inconsistently central to the definition including perceived injustice, strength of belief, need for violence, and personal nature of the threat (Borum, 2023; Brooks & Barry-Walsh, 2022; Corner et al., 2019). The lack of a shared definition may impact how professionals assess, communicate about, or manage grievances. The goal of this project is to clarify the domains that threat assessment professionals use to conceptualize grievance, with the aim of enhancing clear communication across professionals who identify and monitor violence risk. Rather than proposing a definition derived solely from theory or literature, this study develops a proposed conceptual definition grounded in the perspectives of threat assessment professionals.

I first briefly review the etymology of grievance. I describe how grievance can motivate violence and how understanding this motivation can help prevent violence or managing risk. Next, I provide examples of the lack of clarity in the conceptual definition of grievance across threat assessment professionals and describe how this inconsistency leads to issues operationalizing the construct. Finally, I describe the utility of clarifying the construct

The Etymology of Grievance

The word grievance originates from the Latin word gravis, meaning "heavy or grave," and from gravare, meaning "to burden or weigh down." In c. 1300, the Old French word grever meant, "to harm, to burden" (Onions, 1966). Grievance historically referred to actual infliction of harm, not perceived infliction of harm, though the meaning of the word has changed over time. Use of this term was predominately in legal settings and religious settings, but more recently, has moved to the literature and lay settings in reference to emotional suffering. It has also been adopted in threat assessment settings and therefore the definition is being clarified in this study to facilitate clear and consistent communication across threat assessors and to inform risk management. For instance, some theories on the motivation for violence, such as terrorist-related violence, suggest a grievance reflects a disruption in processing a loss (of love or work), humiliation, anger, or blame (Guldimann & Meloy, 2020).

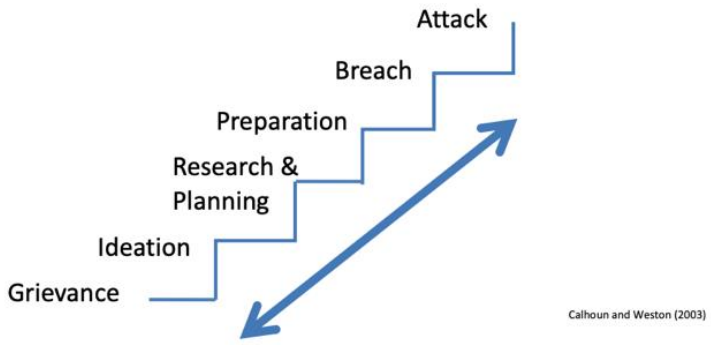
Using the term "grievance" in evaluating threats started during the initial development of the field of threat assessment. To identify and monitor people of concern in the community, threat assessment professionals rely on threat assessment practices and tools. The most common framework for identifying, monitoring, and managing threats is the Pathway to Violence. This framework was heavily inspired by the Exceptional Case Study Project, the seminal U.S. Secret Service study where the field threat assessment began (Fein & Vossekuil, 1997). This project was the first of its kind to research offenders who acted violently towards public officials and public figures. One of the major findings was that almost all (97%) of their sample had histories of grievances and resentments. Further, avenging a perceived wrong was the most common motivation for

these violent attacks. This project resulted in a guide for state and local law enforcement and inspired the development of the Pathway to Violence framework (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998).

Calhoun and Weston (2003) introduced the idea that individuals who intend to be violent move along an identifiable pathway of behaviors and ideas before committing targeted violence. Grievance formulation is the initial step on the Pathway to Violence and occurs when someone feels they have been wronged by a person or institution (Amman et al., 2017)(see Figure 1). When an individual is unable to resolve the burden of the grievance they may begin to believe that violence can help resolve their grievance, this is the violent ideation stage. The individual may then research and plan for how they would logistically and emotionally prepare for this attack, followed by preparing (e.g., acquiring weapons), and breaching potential security barriers before attacking. Not all steps are required for a targeted attack. This framework was based on research exploring motivations for assassination attempts against public figures and applied the same motivations and behaviors to attacks of targeted violence more generally. Grievance is positioned as a foundational motivation of targeted attacks of violence; therefore, a clear conceptual definition for grievance is helpful to inform threat assessment and management practices.

Figure 1.

The Pathway to Violence



Note. From *Contemporary Threat Management: A Practical Guide for Identifying, Assessing, and Managing Individuals of Violent Intent*, by F. S. Calhoun & S. W. Weston, 2003, Specialized Training Services. Copyright 2003 by Specialized Training Services.

More recent studies of grievance have attempted to create a broad categorization of violent offenders who are motivated by a grievance in hopes that this more accurately describes ideation that motivates the Pathway to Violence (Brooks and Barry-Walsh, 2022). Brooks and Barry-Walsh (2022) define lone-actor grievance-fueled violence (LAGFV) offenders as those who pursue:

> Violence towards a specific victim or broader sub-population that emerges due to a perceived experience of injustice, victimization, rejection, or other experiences that may challenge a person's identity or sense of belonging. Among these various forms of offending is the intention to carry out violence, or to convey the ability to inflict harm to achieve outcomes such as justice, retribution, and/or revenge. (pg. 3).

Grievance in threat assessment has moved from (1) being a motivation for assassinations of public figures to (2) being the first stage of the Pathway to Violence, which includes any targeted violence, to (3) being the primary descriptor of a type of violence toward a specific victim *or* a broader subpopulation. The way the definition of conceptual grievance has evolved in these progressive contexts will be further explored in later sections.

Grievance as a Motivation or Cause of Violence

Individual Grievance as a Motivation for Violence

Existing theories of motivation for violence include the general aggression model, which explains aggression as the result of interactions among personal, situational, cognitive, affective, and arousal factors (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), and the cognitive neoassociationistic model, which proposes that aversive experiences activate aggression-related thoughts and emotions (Berkowitz, 1990). This study focuses on action theory because it underpins many violence risk and threat assessment frameworks (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Berkowitz, 1990; Meloy, 2018; Meloy & White, 2013). Action theory views behavior as intentional and goal-directed (Davidson, 1963). Situational action theory extends this theory and proposes that an individual's characteristics interact with their setting and create situations where people perceive action alternatives and choose to

act (Wikström, 2004). Grievances can lead to or motivate action, but they neither guarantee violence nor negative action.

Theories of grievance-fueled violence explore the beliefs and desires, also known as "motivations," preceding action. Some theories of grievance-fueled violence propose that grievances are motivated by a disruption in one of six psychological needs: belonging, significance, certainty, autonomy, identity, or love (Brooks & Ebbrecht, 2026). Threat assessment professionals typically combine their professional judgement and an evidence-based model or framework for effective assessment and case management, and the practical difference in the selected model is an empirical question that has not been tested. The goal of this study is to propose shared language about grievance in a way that professionals are already utilizing in their work, not to advocate for a singular model or theory of motivation for violence.

Grievance as a Motivation for Extremism

Research on motivations for targeted violence parallel research on violent extremism and terrorism. Extremism literature often focuses on grievances from a group lens (Gill, 2016), and the assumption is that the radicalization process is propelled by some shared grievance that forms the in-group (Berger, 2018). Other theories of motivation for terrorism suggest there is a disruption in loss (of love or work), humiliation, anger, or blame (Guldimann & Meloy, 2020). Developing a conceptual definition for grievance can illuminate similarities in how we view the radicalization process and the grievance escalation process. A recent FBI publication overlays the Pathway to Violence and radicalization to extremism and aims to draw together these two processes (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2025). The FBI states that:

> In comparing the [Pathway to Violence] to the concepts of radicalization and mobilization associated with violent extremists, the grievance and violent ideation stages tend to correlate to the radicalization process, and the planning and preparation through the attack stage correlate to mobilization. (p. 28)

This overlap can inform how we monitor threats and identify potential attacks by radicalized extremist groups or individuals with escalating grievances.

Greater conceptual clarity of grievance can broaden extremism identification and research. At present, researchers struggle with extremism being narrowed to instances of individuals who engage in violence on behalf of a political or religious cause (Corner et al., 2016). Additionally, an annual report by Australian Security Intelligence Organization (2023) stated that it is moving away from discrete ideological labels for classifying offender motivations. Creating a conceptual definition for grievance may also allow for extremism researchers to pull from previously explored motivations in individual grievance to expand on nuanced ideologies motivating extremism.

Lack of Clarity in Conceptual Definition of Grievance

There are clear differences in how professionals define grievance. Grievance in threat assessment was first introduced in a study on assassinations of public figures and has broadened to describe a type of violence (i.e., LAGFV) (Brooks and Barry-Walsh, 2022; Fein & Vossekuil, 1997). I will first outline how the FBI definition of grievance has broadened over time. Then I will describe how more recent definitions of grievance differ from one another (Brooks and Barry-Walsh, 2022; Corner et. al, 2023; Cotton & Scalora, 2026). Finally, I will highlight how inconsistent conceptual definitions prevent shared operational definitions.

Evolution of the FBI Definition Over Time

In 2017, the Behavioral Analysis Unit (U.S.) at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) developed a comprehensive guide for identifying, assessing, and managing threats of targeted attacks which incorporated the Pathway to Violence, and defined grievance as:

> A cause of distress or reason for complaint/resentment; in threat assessment and management cases it includes [high] personal significance for the person of concern, often fueling a feeling of being wronged and generating behaviors related to a sense of mission, destiny, loss, or desire for revenge (Amman et al., 2017, p. 96).

This definition draws together key components of grievance such as feelings of being wronged and subsequent behaviors, but the scope of this definition is neither clearly

supported by research nor clear in why specific ideological motivators such as destiny and loss are highlighted as opposed to other potential motivators such as humiliation or anger. Outside of the provided definition, the report touches on other motivations for grievances including revenge for a perceived injury, quest for justice, desire for notoriety or recognition, desire to solve a problem perceived to be unbearable, and desire to kill or be killed. Although this list was formulated through professional experience, it is not exhaustive.

In its updated definition of grievance, the FBI classifies grievance more broadly as "…a real or perceived injustice to self or a group. Grievances do not have to be rational or logical and may make sense only to the offender" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2025, p. 115). Firstly, this definition highlights that the perceived injustice could be to the individual or what the individual perceives to be a sort of group victimization or wronging. In cases where the perceived injustice is against a group, the FBI do not specifically state that other members of the group need to also share this belief, only that the individual believes the group members have been treated unjustly. While their definition allows for greater variety in the nature of a grievance, it does not create clear bounds for what constitutes a grievance that goes beyond a pedestrian complaint (i.e., intensity).

Comparing the FBI and LAGFV Definitions of Grievance

Inherent in the definition of LAGFV is a definition for grievance, "a perceived experience of injustice, victimization, rejection, or other experiences that may challenge a person's identity or sense of belonging" (Brooks and Barry-Walsh, 2022, p. 3). This definition differs from the FBI definitions because the grievance must impact a person's identity or sense of belonging, which is not synonymous with feeling personally wronged. In this way, the impact of a grievance in the LAGFV definition is categorically restricted when compared to the most recent FBI definition.

Whereas with the target of a grievance, the LAGFV definition is arguably broader than the FBI definition because grievances can be directed towards "a specific victim or

broader sub-population," (p. 3) while the FBI definition is embedded in the Pathway to Violence framework does not specify potential targets of violence.

Brooks and Barry-Walsh (2022) acknowledge that LAGFV is still "a blurry construct without definitive rules and boundaries, and instead provides a guiding conceptualization of a diverse group of offenders" (p. 3). Given that grievance is the central commonality to LAGFV, it follows that a clear conceptual definition of grievance is necessary for more concrete understanding of LAGFV.

Shared Grievances Compared to Individual Grievances

The Pathway to Violence literature often discusses individual (i.e., idiosyncratic and independently held) grievances, given that the targeted attacks of violence studied with this framework are often lone offender (e.g., LAGFV). This study focuses on defining grievance largely in the context of individual grievances. The later portion of the study will explore potential differences and similarities across individual and shared grievances with the aim of proposing a conceptual grievance definition that best represents the variation across grievances.

Proposed Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Components of Grievance

More recent studies have collected data to support multi-dimensional conceptualizations of what causes or exacerbates a grievance. For example, Corner and colleagues (2023) propose that developmental factors of a grievance that are sociodemographic, attitudinal, psychological, and experiential. These factors include instability or deterioration of living conditions, emotional problems, expressions of anger, expressions of needs, preoccupation, social rejection, and prejudices as all potential contributing variables to an individual's grievance. Rather than sequentially modelling grievance development, this study will identify the fundamental components required to meet criteria for a grievance and examine related factors threat assessment professionals consider.

Cotton & Scalora (2026) focus on how cognitive, affective, contextual, social, and trait-based factors relate to a self-identified grievance. The contextual, social, and trait-based factors explored in Cotton and Scalora (2026) may be associated with grievance, or be components required for a grievance. This study will explore what key components, which may include cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements, constitute a grievance based on the experiences of threat assessors rather than layperson self-report. The focus on potential cognitive, affective, and behavioral components is rooted in how the literature frequently refers to these components, which is expanded upon below.

Literature on Potential Cognitive Component of Grievance. The perception that the individual has been treated unjustly is a consistently referenced cognitive component of grievance (Amman et al., 2017; Ebbrecht, 2022; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2025). In fact, perceived injustice and grievance are frequently used interchangeably because the injustice is what motivates a grievance. Perceived injustice is a component of grievance rather than a synonym because grievances escalate and encapsulate deeper ideology, rather than simply a singular attitude toward a perceived wrongdoing. Perceived injustices are operationalized as cognitive appraisals regarding the fairness of a situation in a moment in time (Sullivan et al., 2008). Perceived injustices still may be personally significant or inspire a sense of victimization or loss, but they contrast grievance because cognitive components of grievance can be more nuanced and changeable than what the general term "perceived injustice" captures. For example, grievances may include rumination around cognitions, or the perception that there are not alterative explanations or justifications for their suffering. Cotton & Scalora (2026) found that participants' self-reported cognitive preoccupation was associated with more severe forms of problematic approach behavior. This supports the idea that cognitive preoccupation may be an associated or common cognitive feature that affects grievance severity. Of note, this finding does not establish that preoccupation is a required criterion for a grievance, just that it is associated with increased severity of subsequent behavior. Other proposed cognitive components include fixation and preoccupation (Corner et al., 2023; Meloy et al., 2012).

Literature on Potential Affect Component of Grievance. Most definitions of grievance refer to an individual's emotional response to an experience, which situates affect as a potentially key element of grievance (Brooks & Barry-Walsh, 2022; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017). Previous research indicates that emotional salience and emotional dysregulation are associated with problematic approach severity (Cotton & Scalora, 2026). Identifying emotions associated with grievance, such as hate, can be informative indicators of the nature of a grievance. Hate is a potential affective component of grievance because it transforms a perception of being wronged into an emotional response (Martínez et al., 2022). Hatred is a strong dislike or aversion that is exclusively emotional, can have varied targets (e.g., self, others, entities, institutions, etc.), and severity of emotion (e.g., pedestrian hate, extreme hate) (Holzer et al., 2022). As previously discussed, professionals typically conceptualize pedestrian hate as a discriminant construct to grievance because pedestrian hate is an everyday grudge or sense of injustice, while grievance is a term reserved for more deeply rooted emotion (Brooks & Barry-Walsh, 2022). Anger is another potential component of grievance (Guldimann & Meloy, 2020). Anger can mediate the relationship between perceived discrimination and aggression (Sittner et al., 2012). This finding may translate to how a perceived injustice or wrongdoing (i.e., discrimination) can lead to violence (i.e., aggression) when anger is particularly elevated. Understanding the affective components related to thoughts and behaviors may be a useful indicator in understanding grievance development and escalation

Literature on Potential Behavioral Component of Grievance. Behavioral responses to cognitive and affective components are external processes and therefore are more easily observable. If an individual has been ruminating about a grievance, this may result in observable behaviors towards the blamed party or representatives of said party. The FBI's 2017 definition highlights that behaviors driven by various justifications (e.g., sense of mission, destiny, loss, or desire for revenge) are common consequences of grievances, but this definition does not clearly state that a behavior is required for a grievance. The FBI's revised 2025 definition broadened the construct even further and does not require or comment on behavior as an outcome, unlike the previous definition, which notes that grievances often fuel behavior (Amman et. al, 2017; Federal Bureau of

Investigation, 2025). Including behavior as a required component of grievance creates a clear practical threshold because behaviors are more observable and concrete than emotions or thoughts, which are more difficult to identify, especially without access to the person of concern. On the other hand, behavior as a required component of grievance creates a very narrow definition that may result in wrongly disqualifying cases where strong beliefs have potential to fuel violence. This study will aim to clarify if behavior is perceived to be a consequence of grievance or central to a conceptual definition of grievance.

Utility of Grievance Definition in Threat Assessment

Consequence of an Unclear Conceptual Definition of Grievance

The term grievance has been relied upon as an initial stage of targeted violence for decades, but there is no consensus on a clear definition of the construct that allows for the practical use of the term across professionals. The consequences of no shared definition of grievance include an unclear start point for case identification and management for professionals. Further, threat assessment professionals currently rely on categorization (i.e., presence or absence of perceived injustice) rather than a nuanced conceptualization of grievance. Taken together, this creates a blurry picture of the initial stages of the Pathway to Violence that can be inconsistent across professionals (Brooks & Barry-Walsh, 2022). For example, a threat assessment professional may use their discretion to categorize an individual who feels they were wrongly fired two weeks ago and is now leaving strange packages at their old workplace as having a grievance, but not an individual who felt ostracized by a work clique and is now also leaving strange packages at their colleagues' desks. The nature of these threats differ, and because we have inconsistent conceptual definitions of grievance it is unclear what components professionals view as critical to identifying grievance. To appropriately identify grievance and monitor its escalation, we need a shared definition that represents the key components and requirements of a grievance.

Grievance Intensity as an Assessment and Management Tool

Federal Bureau of Investigation (2025) notes frequency (i.e., how often it is occurring) and intensity (i.e., with what degree of strength, energy, or feeling) as critical factors to understanding the intensity of the grievance. This study will interview professionals on their perspectives on intensity thresholds and how monitoring the intensity of a grievance over time could aid violence risk management.

The Present Study

The objective of this study was to propose a clear, shared conceptual definition for grievance and its key components across threat assessment professionals. In this study, I interviewed participants regarding the core components of grievance, how they conceptualize grievance and grievance escalation, and how they distinguish extremism from grievance. I also compared definitions across groups to determine differences in how professions may encounter different varieties of grievance, with what frequency, and whether there are differing conceptualizations of grievance from people with different backgrounds and expertise.

Current working definitions of grievance are either constructed through profession-specific operational experience (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2025) or exist as a subset of a larger framework for what motivates violence that does not comprehensively explore nuanced components of the grievance (Brooks & Barry-Walsh, 2022). Defining grievance consistently would allow for consensus in monitoring persons of concern.

Research Questions

Grounded theory analyses of the interviews with threat assessment professionals will address the following questions:

(a) How do threat assessment professionals conceptualize and define grievance? What are the key components of grievance?

(b) How do threat assessment professionals currently operationalize grievance and its escalation?

(c) How can threat assessment professionals distinguish an escalating grievance from radicalization into extremism? What is the utility of this distinction?

Chapter 2. Method

Research Design Overview and Rationale

Approach to Inquiry

My approach to inquiry is constructivist. This means that I approached the data with the belief that there are multiple realities, or truths, shaped by context and interaction. I did not look at the data as a witness to truth and objectivity. I was also not searching through the data presuming that there was one true answer to my research questions. There was not a clear definition of grievance that I was hoping to *discover*, and there were no clear components of grievance that were waiting to be found. Rather, I approached the data with the understanding that knowledge is *co-created* by researcher and participants. I aimed to construct a definition with participants that was informed by and represents the data.

Recruitment and Data Collection Process Rationale

I chose a purposive sampling method because the definition I constructed is inherently context bound. I do not interpret the context-bound nature of grounded theory research as a limitation because the purpose of my work is not to represent a population or increase statistical generalizability. A predetermined sample size risked under sampling, which could have resulted in an incomplete answer to my research questions, or oversampling, which would have been resource intensive. Instead, the goal of theoretical sampling was to develop a proposed conceptual definition with nuanced expert opinions that are most useful for grievance as a construct. I determined that the selected threat assessment professionals were best positioned to co-create a definition of grievance because of their depth of knowledge about grievances that fuel violence.

After coding eight interviews I determined that the data reached theoretical sufficiency. Consistent with best practice guidelines (Charmaz, 2006), the prospective analytical categories I had formulated were detailed in their descriptions, and enough background data about persons, processes, and settings was gathered to understand and

portray the full range of contexts of this study. Furthermore, the properties of categories were well saturated and discriminant.

Data Analysis Rationale

Constructivist grounded theory was the most appropriate data analytic method for the research questions because it was created to develop new definitions of concepts that have been minimally explored, such as grievance. Constructivist grounded theory is rooted in co-creation and exploration. I familiarized myself with the literature to conceptualize how grievance is currently understood and aimed to co-create rather than simply report various disconnected perspectives because the purpose of a shared definition is to produce a useful conceptualization of the construct by drawing together ideas.

By simultaneously gathering and analyzing data I created a clear conceptualization of grievance that was fleshed out in an iterative manner. This was superior to reflexive thematic analysis, for example, because I was able to adapt the interview questions throughout the data collection process to narrow in on the research questions rather than being limited to analyzing all the data after it was collected. Further, the final product was a proposed definition for grievance, rather than a collection of themes.

The systematic data collection and analysis process outlined below produced data that is credible, original, resonant, and useful (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Credibility was established through reflexive analysis and constant comparative methods and ultimately informed conceptual sufficiency. The data is original because it provides a clear recognition of the problem, that grievance is inconsistently and insufficiently defined, and collects relevant information in response to the problem. Resonance is reflected in how the data illustrates how participants operationalize grievance, but also why clear language to communicate this construct is important. Finally, the data is useful because it sheds light on similarities in clinical and threat assessment professions to practically improve communication.

Researcher Description and Prior Understanding

I am a graduate student in the Clinical Psychology (Forensic Track) program at Simon Fraser University and my prior knowledge on grievance and related constructs comes from my review of the literature as a graduate student as well as my operational knowledge while interning at the Threat Assessment and Threat Management (TATM) team at the Behavioral Analysis Unit at the Federal Bureau of Investigation. These experiences encouraged me to explore both threat assessment professional and clinical perspectives given the limitations of solely relying on the academic literature. I am also a White American woman who has lived in the United States and Canada, so my interpretations of the data and pathway to violence framework I am most familiar with is North American. I reviewed international threat assessment literature prior to interviewing non-North American participants to better understand an international threat assessment perspective. Of note, my reviews of the literature prior to interviewing participants and analyzing data are not comparable to a full literature review, which was instead a later step after data analysis. Conducting a literature review after data analysis reduced bias in the data analytic process and allowed me to form opinions with fewer preconceived ideas.

My own beliefs inherently informed how I interpreted the data and will never be truly unbiased. Prior to conducting and analyzing the interviews with threat assessment professionals I had expectations about what the participants would describe. Based on my previous review of the literature, I expected threat assessment professionals to view grievances as extreme manifestations of pedestrian hate and describe them as the first step on the pathway to violence that can fester and evolve into violent ideation. I expected threat assessment professionals with clinical backgrounds to have a broader view of grievance that does not necessitate hostile action but does not exclude such instances. I anticipated that most participants would make some reference to revenge or vengefulness as a component of grievance. I did not have expectations about what domains participants will organically produce beyond the domains I probed for at the end of the interview (i.e., perceived injustice, nature of grievance, severity of grievance, and pedestrian hate). I anticipated that professionals would view extremism as a grievance

shared by a group, and radicalization to extremism as a similar, but distinct process from individual grievance escalation.

Researcher-Participant Relationship

I did not have pre-existing relationships with any of the participants and connected with participants through my supervisors' networks (i.e., Drs. Kevin Douglas, Stephen Hart, and Catherine Shaffer) and through professional networks I am a student member of.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

To select participants, I engaged in a purposive sampling method, specifically, expert sampling. While purposive sampling introduced greater risk of selection bias, it is superior to random sampling for our research questions because one of the main goals of the study is to gather in-depth insights into how professionals in the field conceptualize grievance rather than a broad representation of more superficial perceptions of grievance that might be obtained through a large and more diverse survey of professionals. This participant selection process aimed to gather rich data that highlights the nuances of perceptions of grievance in the field.

I recruited threat assessment experts because "grievance" as a construct is most applicable to this group of professionals. Furthermore, one of the main goals of this study, and grounded theory, is to go into the field (e.g., talk to experts in the field) to determine how theory functions in the real world (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I interviewed threat assessment professionals (i.e., specialists in threat assessment in law enforcement, school, corporate security, workplace, mental health, or related settings).

To recruit participants, I emailed threat assessment and forensic mental health networks such as the Canadian Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (CATAP), American Psychology Law Society (AP-LS), and International Association of Forensic Mental Health Services (IAFMHS).

I sent an initial email through association listservs, then a reminder email two months later. I also circulated the study to supervisors and other professional colleagues

and asked them to distribute it to any eligible colleagues to target professionals who have a wide array of in-depth knowledge on grievance. I also emailed professionals with relevant experience identified using the area filter (i.e., violence risk and sex offender risk assessment, violence risk assessment, juvenile evaluations) of the American Academy of Forensic Psychology (AAFP) member directory.

I presented a poster project proposal at the CATAP 2025 Annual Workshop and Conference to recruit participants and anonymously survey expert threat assessment professional perspectives on grievance as a construct. At this conference I included a QR code on my poster where conference attendees could sign up to participate in my study. I also included a "Grievance Box" next to my poster with clear instructions indicating that attendees could "Please anonymously write down any questions or comments about what (a) the core components of a 'grievance' are, (b) constitutes a 'grievance' in the field, and/or (c) how a 'grievance' develops and evolves." I used these comments and questions to adapt my interview questions as the data collection process progressed.

I advertised the interview as an "Interview on Grievance Concepts" and provided the "Defining a Grievance" and "Distinguishing Grievance from Other Constructs/Differentiating Related Concepts" questions to participants before the interview. I did this to promote transparency and allow them to feel comfortable in their answers before the interview. I did not include the other sections of questions in the interview guide to avoid inserting my own opinion. I conducted the semi-structured interviews remotely via Zoom. No monetary incentives were provided.

My initial sampling was followed by theoretical sampling until I reached theoretical sufficiency. I started with a small, directed sample of threat assessment professionals and clinicians as a point of departure (i.e., initial sampling) and analyzing and conducting interviews in an iterative manner (i.e., theoretical sampling). I continued this process until additional data did not contribute new insights (i.e., theoretical sufficiency). There will always be some aspect of novelty and insight from new data collected, so determining theoretical sufficiency meant determining that there was adequate depth and richness to our categories. I wrote memos after each interview. Each memo was approximately 3 pages in length and detailed how codes related to one another within the interview and across interviews, in addition to commentary on potential

categories. The memo writing process allowed me to determine adequacy. I did not find negative cases, which means cases that contradicted the essence of the theory that was being developed. However, I did find some cases they had divergent views on the importance of defining grievance, with some people finding it very important and others finding it less essential. I did not determine this to be an example of negative cases as related to our categories.

Sample Description

The sample consisted of 8 threat assessment professionals. While I did not collect exact years of experience when interviewing, I estimate that 6 participants were late-career (i.e., 15 or more years of experience), 1 was mid-career (i.e., approximately 5 years out of graduate school), and 1 was in graduate school. The sample consisted largely of highly experienced individuals. I calculated this estimate from participants report, and when unavailable, I reviewed their LinkedIn profiles after data analysis. Most participants had clinical psychology backgrounds, all but one had or were pursuing a PhD in clinical psychology; the exception works in law enforcement. They worked in a variety of settings including healthcare, university, corporate, and juvenile probation. Participants were from the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa.

Data Collection

I conducted 8 semi-structured interviews (approximately 1 hour each) via Zoom. I used two semi-structured interview guides, each adapted to the profession of the participant (i.e., threat assessment professional or clinical background) (See Appendix A). The interview guides were adapted for each profession to include language that participants were more familiar with and felt more confidently working from. The language in the semi-structured interviews was adapted through a process of integrating input from threat assessment and clinical colleagues. The interviews began with open-ended questions that request that the participant organically produce domains and a definition for grievance. If the participant did not organically produce additional domains of interest, those domains were probed for *at the end of the interview* to reduce researcher

bias (i.e., suggesting my own domains, thereby inserting my own opinion, that dictate how conversation is led). All interviews were audiotaped and/or videotaped and transcribed verbatim using GoTranscript (i.e., a software platform that utilizes human transcription with 99% accuracy). I adapted interview questions as I collected and analyzed data with the goal of gathering information that best answered my research questions. At the conclusion of the study, I made all materials and de-identified transcripts publicly accessible to ensure high confirmability, descriptive, and interpretive validity (Appendix B).

Data Analysis

My graduate student research assistant and I took a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach to the data analysis which included memo writing, constant comparison, simultaneous data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and theoretical sampling. My graduate student research assistant participated in both ongoing processes, the initial coding, and the focused coding.

Our data analysis process involved two ongoing processes and five phases adapted from (Charmaz, 2006):

Ongoing Processes

Ongoing Process 1: Constant Comparative Method. Constant comparison means comparing different people (i.e., their views, situations, experiences, etc.), different data from the same individual at multiple timepoints (e.g., line-by-line codes within the same interview), different data with categories (e.g., any data with any categories), and categories with other categories. This process is to continuously test how codes hold up against the test of comparison, and how categories fit into the theory that is being developed as the data are analyzed.

Ongoing Process 2: Memo Writing. We recorded the processes, actions, and assumptions that were made as we developed our codes and categories. We commented on how codes related to one another, our decisions during the coding process, how

categories were formed, and reflected on our positionality in the process. Memo writing kept us centered on the research questions.

Phase 1: Initial Coding

We independently systematically read through the transcripts word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident to identify segments of data that appeared meaningful to any of the research questions listed above. We had the research questions pulled up in a separate tab, or printed beside us, to view as we reviewed each transcript. We applied analytically meaningful (i.e., descriptive and singular) code labels to these segments of data. Our code labels were action codes, which are codes that emphasize what the participant is doing, feeling, and experiencing to facilitate constant comparison. This also included *in vivo* codes, which were codes of participants' terminology that preserved the participant's meanings and views. We then collated our code labels and their relevant data segments of data in an Excel spreadsheet. We then came together as a group to compare initial codes and refine them.

Phase 2: Focused Coding

We used the initial codes we generated that reappeared frequently to sort larger amounts of data; these selected codes are called focused codes. We selected codes that contributed to the conceptual understanding of the data and how that fits, or fails to fit, with the emerging theoretical framework (i.e., the literature's description of a grievance definition at present). From these focused codes we developed categories that synthesized these concepts. We then came together as a group to compare focused codes and categories.

Phase 3: Sorting - Integration and Theory Development

I finalized our codes and categories that fit into an overarching story about the data. I developed a shared proposed definition for grievance, that described the patterns across the data and reflects the experiences and opinions of the participants. I also included member-checking of the results in this phase, which includes sending the

participants the results and proposed definition to review to confirm the content reflects their experience of the interview itself.

Chapter 3. Results

Core Components of Grievance and Their Properties

I propose the following conceptual definition for grievance: a grievance is (1) a perceived personal harm, unfairness, or conflict which results in (2) dissatisfaction or anger toward a specific individual, institution, or group that has (3) the potential to motivate behavior. The components are described in detail below.

Perceived Harm, Unfairness, or Conflict

Perceived harm, unfairness, or conflict refers to an incident that an individual perceives to be harmful, unfair, or conflictual. The issue only needs to make sense to that individual and does not need to be perceived by others as logical, rational, or reality-based.

The individual initially interprets that there is an issue, which triggers an emotional response including humiliation, shame, ostracism, discrimination, or other negative interpretations. This perceived problem or conflict is the index event for a grievance. The emotional response may create a perceived justification for behavior and motivation to act, though most people who feel harmed or wronged do not respond with action, particularly violent action.

In a given individual the issue may be a single event or multiple events that compound one another. Events may coalesce given that they are related by content, target, emotional, or cognitive response. For example, if there is an index event with an identifiable target that is exacerbated by subsequent interactions with or about that target, then those events may compound.

Interacting with the sources of the perceived harm, unfairness, or conflict may resolve or maintain the grievance. If there is a natural solution to the problem, or successful confrontation, then the perceived harm, unfairness, or conflict may be resolved. Professionals can also make attempts to repair an individual's perception of

harm with an early intervention. For example, issuing well-delivered expressions of empathy, compassion, and apologies where appropriate can clarify misunderstandings and diffuse the grievance. However, in instances without a clear solution the perceived injustice may be maintained through lack of resolution, further compounding events, or linking the issue to something much greater that threatens their way of life.

Grievances may go dormant for a period of time given the presence of protective factors or access limitations. Perceived harm, unfairness, or conflict may still be unresolved for the individual unless provided convincing evidence (e.g., formal amends). There is tail risk for when behaviors indicative of grievance decreases but the problem or conflict is still unresolved. Losing a protective factor may change risk and the person's response to their grievance.

Dissatisfaction or Anger toward a Specific Individual, Institution, or Group

Dissatisfaction or anger toward a specific individual, institution, or group refers to the dissatisfaction, distaste, anger, or upset that the aggrieved person feels towards a specific individual, institution, or group. These negative feelings are distinguishable from generalized existential frustration (e.g., life is unfair), and broader ideological and moral outrage because there is a specific target with a grievance. These negative feelings in an individual come from the index event(s), perceived harm, unfairness, or conflict. Negative feelings being directed at a target can be an internal experience for an aggrieved person and does not require words or actions to be outwardly directed at the target.

The target of a grievance may evolve over time, particularly if the grievance grows from the perception of harm by one person to perceived harmed by a community of people with some common trait or shared belief. For some aggrieved people a problem or conflict may be resolved with the individual or institution they felt harmed by, but given how pervasive the grievance is, they do not feel resolution with the group of people that individual or institution may belong to or be associated with. In this case and others, the grievance may persist despite the index event being seemingly resolved.

Negative feelings towards oneself are not mutually exclusive with grievance but are also not a requirement for a grievance. If a person experiences perceived harm, unfairness, or conflict and has a negative emotional response but only directs those negative emotions at themselves, then they do not have a grievance. Negative feelings can start as self-directed and spread to other targets and develop into a grievance; but when the negative feelings are only self-directed there is no grievance. Negative thoughts and emotions towards oneself are on the spectrum of responses an individual can have towards negative life events.

Personal Impact

Personal impact refers to when an individual perceives the harm, unfairness, or conflict they have experienced as personal. The reality of the event or conflict may have little logical or rational personal connection to the individual, but they can be personally impacted by the experience, nonetheless. Direct contact or communication is not necessary for an individual to be personally impacted by something.

Aggrieved people will often wrongly personalize experiences and overestimate how much others think about them. Their meaning making can, at times, be distorted so they feel persecuted and targeted. This meaning making occurs on a spectrum which can range from normative meaning making to clinically distorted thinking including ideas of reference and persecutory delusions. Clinically distorted thinking triggers mental health intervention strategies, when possible, to manage risk.

The personal impact of the issue creates a psychological closeness that makes the issue more threatening to the individual. When an issue is more threatening it will demand more cognitive resources and result in greater amounts of time and perseveration on the issue. Issues that are perceived as more threatening also are more likely to consume individuals and result in action.

The personal impact of grievance is what differentiates grievance from generalized hate. Hate groups and violent extremists can have no personal connection with their target and still have strong negative feelings towards that target, but grievances

have a personal component typically associated with the index event(s). If the perceived harm, unfairness, or conflict is not personal it still may result in negative consequences or even violence. However, this may occur through different theorized developmental pathways such as the staircase to terrorism or radicalizing to extremism. These pathways are quite similar to the pathway to violence and using personal impact to distinguish which pathway is more appropriate is not always necessary given that the cases are responded to in a similar manner.

Has the Potential to Motivate Behavior

Grievances potentially motivate behavior because they involve issues that have historically shaped, or have the potential to shape, an individual's behavior. An individual does not need to have already engaged in a behavior to have a grievance because a grievance is a mindset. A grievance is the motivation or engine driving behavior, not the behavior itself.

Behavior is an action or effortful cognitive process.

Actions can be implicit or explicit. Individuals may respond to their grievance with covert behaviors, threats by illusion, veiled threats, or any type of implied threat. Behaviors may be repeated or have a single occurrence. There is a spectrum of responses that people have to grievances. Individuals may respond to their grievance with constructive action or destructive action, depending on the functionality of their behavior. If an individual is aggrieved about a war against their country of origin they deem to be unjust they may engage in political activism in attempt to resolve their grievance, which can be constructive. Other individuals in the same circumstance may engage in destructive action where their behavior is dysfunctional for them or others around them. A grievance does not need to have a negative consequence, and in some cases grievances can motivate constructive action when the individual responds with functional and prosocial problem solving or is able to cope effectively.

There is also a range of maladaptive or unwanted behaviors a person may engage in as a response to a grievance, and at the very end of that spectrum is fatal violence.

Violence can be a last resort for individuals responding to their grievance, but most grievances will not result in violence. Querulous individuals or vexatious litigants may engage in unrelenting complaints to court a behavior motivated by their grievance.

Grievances can be nurtured internally and don't require outward expression to be present. There are instances where people do not discuss their grievance with anyone and go on to commit violence, and there are instances where people express their grievance constantly with threats they will never act on. The absence of outward expressions of grievance does not exclude someone from having a grievance. However, outwardly expressing a grievance may indicate escalation or subsequent action and is a larger part of how professionals conceptualize risk and monitor the intensity of a case.

Effortful cognitive processes such as ruminating on the grievance are considered behaviors because of the substantial effort required and the consequences of the rumination. Planning around and ruminating on grievances are costly to the individual and are quite effortful. Effortful cognitive processes create potential for a grievance that consumes the individual, but being consumed by the grievance is not a requirement for having a grievance.

How Professionals Operationalize Grievance

Identifying the Presence of a Grievance and Monitoring Related Risks

Professionals monitor risk, not grievance. They monitor the individual's observable behaviors, often generated by the grievance, and the associated features or characteristics of the grievance. If the case presentation is more intense, that will change the monitoring and intervention on the case. The purpose of identifying grievance and its associated features or characteristics is to understand the motivation for behavior, which informs risk and intervention. Not all cases require a deep understanding of motivation, and if present, the grievance may only be identified at a superficial level. For example, one threat assessor highlighted that in many homicide cases they had worked they found that understanding the motivation was not relevant to managing the individual's risk and instead they focused more on tactics.

Professionals determine the extent to which they need to assess a grievance based on the case information they have. Initially, they receive a referral and triage the case. Threat assessment professionals and clinicians alike emphasize the importance of a low bar for concern for referrals. Despite high referral rates overburdening threat teams, reporting concerns early rather than waiting for more significant harm is the standard. Upon triaging the case they will determine if they have sufficient cause for concern to warrant further assessment. If they have insufficient information, they seek additional information at triage before making the determination for a more comprehensive assessment. They usually become aware of the grievance, if present, at the outset of the triage or assessment. Upon further assessment, the professional may become aware of more of the associated features or characteristics as necessary.

Presence or change in associated features and characteristics may indicate an escalation and can trigger re-assessment of risk. Associated features and characteristics of grievance are not an exhaustive list of risk related factors and warning signs. There are warning signs and risk considerations not captured in how professionals have described associated features of grievance because a grievance is not the only consideration in assessing risk. As mentioned previously, grievances are not required for risk or violence, but they are often present. Relying solely on grievance and its associated features would oversimplify risk and miss cases and scenarios that are not captured in the definition of grievance.

Identify and Monitor the Intensity of the Case Presentation

Professionals noted that case presentation is dimensional and can include grievance when present. Intensity refers to the seriousness of the case and the trajectory of the case that determines the level of intervention and monitoring required. Identifying and monitoring intensity of case presentation is how professionals assess risk.

The intensity of a grievance is dimensional in that a combination of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components indicate a more intense presentation warranting more attention and intervention.

The content, context, and frequency of these components influence intensity. For example, if an individual ruminates for 4-5 hours each day about how they want to yell at their boss for passing them up on a promotion, that is a lower intensity case than an individual who spends 30 minutes each day thinking about how to kill their boss for the same reason. There is an interaction between frequency and content in the examples above, but context is also influential. If the person who is ruminating daily for 4-5 hours about yelling at their boss has a history of stalking past bosses, then fantasizing about confronting their boss may pose additional risks and signify greater seriousness.

Context can also include how the individual's behaviors correspond with external events. If an individual changes the target of their grievance after receiving divorce papers from their ex-wife to the ex-wife's new boyfriend, that is a consideration related to intensity. The context of how a behavior is received can also inform intensity. A behavior causing fear in others does not guarantee that the behavior is intentional or serious. Similarly, a behavior that goes unnoticed or unchallenged by others can still be serious or threatening. The actus reus, or guilty act, of a behavior is useful particularly for law enforcement when attempting to meet the legal standard for intervention. However, actus reus is not the standard threat assessment professionals and clinicians use to assess a threat because it does not capture the risk level and intention of an action appropriately.

Intensity is affected by an individual's capacity to problem solve, cope, and function in their daily life while maintaining their grievance. They may be unable to do some of their key life tasks and be totally consumed by the grievance. In less intense cases the individual may be able to create psychological distance between the grievance and other aspects of life and compartmentalize it in various environments (e.g., home, work, socially, etc.). When the individual lacks the resources or individual characteristics to adjust to negative experiences this can have an impact on functioning in their daily life through domains like work and relationships. These are associated features of grievance that can influence intensity and explain why functioning is impaired.

When identifying intensity professionals identify case-specific behaviors that should trigger notification to the professional that intensity may be changing, and

therefore risk may be changing. New activity in the case can include reductions or increases in a behavior and can even include changes in appearance, hygiene, and grooming that reflect a change in functioning. In particular, new instances of loss, anger, blame, and humiliation can result in an increase in intensity. Reductions in behavior warrant re-evaluation of risk, professionals only accept that lowering intensity is a true reduction of risk if there is something that explains this behavior well. In some cases there is a tail-risk, which is a rare scenario where it may appear that an individual is reducing risk when in fact they are bunkering down (i.e., isolating themselves) and transitioning from ideation to planning and this period is a paradoxical indication that their risk has increased.

Associated Features or Characteristics of Grievance

These are features that professionals identified as related to grievance and common characteristics. These associated features create conditions where a grievance is maintained or escalates.

Grievances Are Maintained or Escalate When the Issue Consumes the Individual

A grievance uses up an individual's resources, which can be physical, financial, social, and/or psychological. The individual's investment in their grievance determines how they respond to the grievance. If an individual is very invested in their grievance this will likely be reflected in the resources they dedicate to resolving or feeding the grievance.

It is common for a grievance to consume the individual's psychological resources because they often ruminate or perseverate on the issue. Ruminating includes dwelling on past events in a repetitive manner without making progress towards a solution. For example, an individual who was terminated for harassing their coworkers might continuously write about their experience of being fired and describe the HR process as a personal vendetta. They might rehearse every conversation where they felt slighted by

their malicious coworkers. In this case, time and cognitive capacity are resources being consumed.

Perseverating means being stuck in an involuntary cognitive or behavioral loop even in the absence of a trigger. The same individual who was fired might whisper under their breath the speech they would give the HR manager or interrupt conversations with friends and family to compulsively discuss their grievance that is unrelated to the topic of conversation. These behaviors may not be conscious or intentional, and the individual may lack insight into how the grievance is impacting their life. In this example, time, cognitive capacity, and social support are resources being consumed.

Maintaining a state of intense personal grievance is very debilitating physiologically because the person can experience high degrees of sympathetic arousal. The way a grievance consumes an individual can be very costly to their well-being, including the long-term physiological effects of acute and chronic stress on the body. Individuals can become hypervigilant, which is a similarly effortful process that draws from an individual's psychological and potentially physiological resources. The consequences of a grievance consuming an individual can be observed by increased health issues, which can also come from health issues that have gone neglected because of intense focus on the grievance.

A grievance can consume an individual's resources daily but not affect all areas of functioning. For example, they may be posting actively online about their hatred towards women and fail to engage in any kind of relationship with women, but they can function normally at their job.

Professionals are limited to the affected areas of functioning that they have visibility on. Therefore, impairment in functioning can be a useful indicator of if a grievance is consuming an individual. Impairment in functioning can also stem from when an individual lacks the resources or individual characteristics to adjust to negative experiences, so the context of the impairment determines whether it is caused by an individual actively directing their resources to grievance or the absence of resources or characteristics.

Getting an estimate for the amount of time and energy required to engage in certain behaviors, such as making 100 posts on X in three days, are other indicators of how the grievance may be consuming the individual. A grievance may start from an index event and be held for years. A long-lasting grievance is not a reason for concern on its own. Some individuals nurture a grievance for years and never outwardly express it, while others develop a grievance and act within the weeks following the index event. The duration of a grievance coupled with the behaviors, particularly escalating behaviors, is what causes concern. Professionals sometimes refer to the grievance as an "entrenched grievance" when it is long-lasting enduring state that consumes the individual.

Grievances Are Maintained or Escalate When the Individual Lacks the Resources or Individual Characteristics to Adjust to Negative Experiences

This occurs when an individual does not have the supports, skills, or personality features necessary to overcome a negative experience in a functional and prosocial way. The individual may lack resources because they have depleted them through being consumed by the grievance. They may also lose access to resources for other reasons, or they may have never had access to resources.

Resources can be situational or environmental, including community supports, financial supports, or emotional supports that prevent the individual from moving on with their life and working with or around the issue. Professionals might refer to these as the absence of protective factors in the person's life. This creates an opportunity for intervention because there is a deficit in the individual's external world that allows for problem solving. For example, if an individual has a grievance with their previous employer and their lack of current employment is maintaining the grievance, vocational support may help relieve the grievance. An individual can also have a grievance and lose a protective factor, which can trigger a response because they may be losing resources that previously allowed them to adjust or cope.

Many grievances also include underlying mental health issues, skills deficits, and personality features that prevent the individual from adjusting. For example, many individuals with grievances make failed attempts at help-seeking behavior. Attempts at

help-seeking may fail because external resources are truly unavailable or unwilling, in which case this would be lacking resources to adjust to negative experiences. However, the individual's help-seeking attempts may also fail because of their own deficits in social skills, communication abilities, or personality features. Individuals might fail to communicate clearly or articulate their ask in a realistic manner which leads to unrealistic expectations for a reaction.

Individuals with underlying mental health issues, including personality disorders, can make threats of self-harm to a past employer as a form of help-seeking (Note: self-harm can also be a conscious attempt at coercive control, so more information is needed to make this determination). A variety of personality features can make it more difficult for individuals to adjust to negative experiences. For example, shame sensitive individuals are more vulnerable to humiliating events and may struggle to cope effectively. Some individuals are prone to project responsibility and deny personal agency, which leads to externalizing blame rather than understand how they can resolve or avoid conflict.

An individual who has a grievance toward their past employer may ineffectively help-seek, such as sending harassing emails to human resources or making disparaging posts online, hoping that this will create accountability and initiate a return to their old position.

These help-seeking attempts are examples of problem-solving skills deficits and often maintain the grievance, leaving the individual feeling dejected and fueling the grievance.

More generally, when an aggrieved person lacks resources or individual characteristics for functional coping their grievance can be maintained, escalate, or result in suicidal ideation.

If the grievance is maintained or escalates the risk needs to be managed by recognizing the lack of resources or individual characteristics. If the individual continues to pursue the same avenues despite restrictions, due to their personal characteristics or

beliefs about what constitutes effective help-seeking, they must be informed that this approach is counterproductive. If communicating how their approach is dysfunctional would escalate risk or is ineffective, alternative approaches to managing risk are necessary while recognizing the limited skills of the individual.

Negative life events can trigger suicidality, particularly when an individual's help-seeking attempts fail they can feel hopeless and suicidal. As noted previously, suicidal ideation is on the spectrum of responses to a grievance and may evolve into external hate and motivation for violence towards others. Suicidality is typically viewed as an aggravating factor because suicidal ideation can indicate a possible disregard for consequences. There is also a sense of limited agency for individuals experiencing suicidal ideation and limited agency in for individuals with a grievance. In both instances, individuals can engage in all-or-nothing mindsets that demonstrate a lack of cognitive flexibility beyond a singular response as the perceived only solution. Individuals have attempted to resolve a thwarted psychological need and may see the next option as violence towards themselves or others.

These deficits are associated features of grievance but are not required for a grievance. If an individual lacks resources or characteristics to move on this is a vulnerability point for escalation and opportunity for intervention rather than central to what the grievance is.

Grievances Are Maintained or Escalate When the Individual Behaviorally Reinforces the Grievance

This occurs when individuals prompt situations where they catalogue data to confirm their belief. Individuals often go online and view material that reinforces their position which increases their own emotional and cognitive agitation. Behaviorally reinforcing a grievance can serve as a coping strategy to validate one's own beliefs, interact with their grievance outside of their own mind, and justify their emotions.

Behaviorally reinforcing the grievance can also build an acquired capacity for action through building a stronger perceived justification over time. In some cases,

people have a desire for action and are looking to justify it so they seek opportunities to be aggravated or triggered so they can rationalize their retaliatory behavior. This "looking" may be a conscious or unconscious process. Individuals might not recognize that they are looking to justify their own behavior. Behaviorally reinforcing their grievance can also include going into an environment where their target is in person, or visiting the scene of an index event, to reinforce their thoughts and emotions.

A consequence of behaviorally reinforcing grievances on the internet is that when people enter online communities without a specific ideology, only their personal experience, they can shape their experience to fit into communities with idiosyncratic or esoteric perspectives. These communities are often echo chambers of like-minded believers who allow the grievance to be further entrenched. In some cases, this may lead to individuals actualizing other's aspirations for action.

Grievances Are Maintained or Escalate When the Individual Links the Issue to Something Much Greater that is Threatening Their Way of Life

This occurs when the individual views the issue as disrupting their way of life as a human being. The individual might feel that their identity has been harmed or fractured, or their meaning making has devolved because of how entrenched their grievance is. They may initially view their grievance as an individual instance, but that then grows into something much larger. When a grievance consumes someone it can color how they view the world and change how they interpret any sort of new information or events. Their confirmation bias is heightened, and they are hypervigilant to information related to the grievance. They are unable to reconcile the issue and see it to be threatening their way of life.

This viewpoint can make someone feel extremely threatened and justified, even forced, to act. When an individual feels their way of life is threatened because of a conflict, they may have a sense of agency that they can make things fair and just. This perception can lead people to see violence as a last resort after pursing other resolution attempts or coping strategies and failing.

The Relationship Between Grievance, Extremism, and Shared Grievances

Extremism and Grievances Are Often Interconnected, and Both Largely Start from an Index Event and Function Similarly

Grievances are distinctly personal and specific, whereas extremist beliefs do not need to be personal, though they can be. People with extremist beliefs look to promote a cause or belief and experience more philosophical or moral outrage.

Grievances can create a cognitive opening in vulnerable people to other problematic belief systems. A grievance typically precedes extremism; however, a grievance is not required for an individual to adopt extremist beliefs. An individual may start with a grievance, enter an online community to behaviorally reinforce their grievance, and cherry pick additional belief systems that support their own view or condone violence if they are seeking justification for violence.

There Is No Useful Distinction Between Assessing Individual and Shared Grievances Given That They Function Similarly

Similar to how understanding a grievance in-depth is not necessary unless the details inform risk management, it is also not useful to distinguish if the grievance is shared unless it informs risk management. If the individual believes they can solve their problem through violence, the nature of the grievance being individual or shared does not matter. Professionals use parallel procedures in assessing both, including identify the index event, developing a case formulation, and applying the tool or model they find most appropriate. Some professionals note that individual grievances may have greater intensity. However, they also note that it is easier for someone to get over their grievance if it is not shared.

Chapter 4. Discussion

To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first to propose a shared practitioner-informed conceptual definition of grievance using constructivist grounded theory. This study proposes that grievances consist of three required components: (1) a perceived personal harm, unfairness, or conflict (2) which results in dissatisfaction or anger toward a specific individual, institution, or group (3) that has the potential to motivate behavior.

The first component of grievance is cognitive. A perception of being wronged, harmed, victimized, or treated unjustly are all terms highlighted in the literature as the origins of a grievances (Amman et al., 2017; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2025; Brooks & Barry-Walsh, 2022; Pathé et al., 2018). Participants indicated that the perceived issue needs to only be understood by the grievance holder and does not need to be rational or grounded in reality. This is consistent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (2025) definition of grievance, which explicitly stated that grievance is a perceived injustice that does not need to be rational or logical and prioritized this as the primary and sole requirement for a grievance. Personal significance and impact are also key descriptors of grievance, consistent with prior research (Amman et al., 2017; Monahan, 2016; Scalora et al., 2003).

The second component of grievance is affective. Previous descriptions of an emotional response to a grievance include distress, resentment, humiliation, anger, and blame (Amman et al., 2017; Guldimann & Meloy, 2020). Identifying a specific target aligns with grievance as the first step on the pathway to violence, given the emphasis on targeted violence inherent in this framework (Calhoun & Weston, 2003).

The third component of grievance is potential for behavior. While one existing definition notes that grievances "often" generate behaviors, behavior is typically excluded from formal definitions of grievance (Amman et al., 2017). In this study, participants described that the emotional response to the issue only needs to have the potential to motivate behavior and does not guarantee that behavior will occur. Individuals may be at an earlier stage of their grievance development and not be

sufficiently motivated, prepared, or consumed by their grievance to have engaged in behavior. Defining "potential" would vary based on the professional contexts. For example, law enforcement is constrained by legal standards of reasonable and probable grounds, while psychologists typically refer to case law concerning a clear and imminent risk of serious bodily harm. Creating a threshold for "potential" behavior is a question posed by risk and threat assessment researchers with variability across frameworks and models. For the purposes of this study, participants reached consensus on a low threshold for potential to generate behaviors to keep a broad definition that does not prematurely foreclose case formulation possibilities. Finally, behavior does not need to be maladaptive, and grievances can motivate constructive action such as political activism. Interestingly, this idea that grievances can produce constructive action has not been explored in previous literature.

Overall, participants emphasized the importance of a clear broad definition of grievance to avoid limiting the scope of a case formulation and screening out the possibility of a grievance. Similarly to how they describe the triage process of a case, they note that there should be a low bar for concern and therefore a broad definition. Participants operationalize grievance by identifying the observable behaviors generated by the grievance and its associated features. Identifying grievance informs their risk conceptualization and creates opportunities for intervention. Understanding grievance is not relevant to every case and is dependent on other risk-relevant factors and the intensity of the grievance. In some cases, identifying the presence of a grievance is sufficient to inform risk and other risk-relevant factors require more attention. For example, if an individual is experiencing a mental health crisis, the content of their delusion, which motivates them, is pathologically fixed and working around the delusion with other management and intervention strategies is more important that addressing or confronting the delusion.

Professionals monitor the intensity of the case presentation and an increase in the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. They also incorporate the content, context, and frequency of components into their formulation of risk. They also include relevant associated characteristics that may maintain or escalate the grievance in their conceptualization.

In practice, threat assessment professionals commonly see grievances that consume the individual, which might be expressed as ruminating or perseverating. Grievances may also be impacted by circumstances where the individual lacks resources or internal characteristics to adjust to the issue. In some cases, people behaviorally reinforce their grievance and will prompt or engage in situates meant to confirm their own beliefs or further agitate them. Participants also identified that individuals frequently link the issue of their grievance to something much greater in their life. These characteristics are frequently associated with grievances and are often incorporated into how professionals monitor the intensity of a grievance. These associated features aren't intended to create a new model for motivation for violence or a new set of warning signs and behaviors. The purpose of highlighting these associated features is to capture features that professionals already deem as relevant to grievance and monitoring cases.

Participants did not endorse any clear useful distinction between individual grievances and violent extremism. As anticipated, participants described very similar pathways of development and assessing threats for shared grievances or extremism and individual grievances. However, participants did not distinguish the processes with any unique features to violent extremism or shared grievance and would primarily use this information to inform tool selection (e.g., the TRAP-18 as compared to the WAVR-21). Participants cautioned against an academic definition or typology of grievance and describing extremism as a subtype of grievance may be overly academic and prescriptive. Instead, professionals endorse viewing their processes as essentially the same. Future research should explore how intervention outcomes and management strategies share similarities and where they may differ based on similar assessment and monitoring strategies of individual grievances and shared grievances or extremist beliefs. Research on extreme overvalued beliefs focuses on grievances shared by a group and is a well-studied construct that has potential as a comparative group for the individual grievance definition outlined above.

There were also no clear or meaningful differences between how participants with clinical backgrounds and non-clinical threat assessment professionals viewed grievance. They identified the same core components and associated features. Clinicians did focus more on the individual's internal state, their thoughts and feelings, whereas threat

assessment professionals discussed outward behaviors and the presence or absence of a grievance more. The differences in emphasis may be attributable to their professional context and role responsibilities such that clinicians are more likely to have direct contact and establish a working relationship with the individual and threat assessment professionals more commonly assess the risk from a more distant and potentially imminent capacity with less data.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant consideration. The definition was created with professionals who assess grievances, not from individuals who hold grievances. It is unclear whether these components and associated features resonate for individuals who hold more intense grievances and may engage in violent behaviour. However, Cotton and Scalora (2026) recently explored this in a self-report study and reported evidence for components similar to those explored above. Future research might explore how this definition maps onto cases where grievances have been identified in clinical and threat assessment settings.

This research is also limited by researcher subjectivity through my positionality and interpretive lens that shapes the theory. The purpose of creating a constructivist grounded theory is meant to integrate perspectives in an informed way that goes beyond reporting participant perspectives and presenting data. My position that there may be cognitive, affective, and behavioral components to grievance led to me later proposing to participants if these components were something they recognize in their own work, which is a leading question. While most participants provided examples and organically produced aspects of these components without prompting, my interpretation of the data is biased by those pre-existing ideas.

Strengths

The strengths of this study were the expert participants with applied knowledge that go beyond conceptualizing grievance from an academic perspective. Professionals already operationalize grievance in practice and this constructive method allowed for a

theory that is co-constructed rather than prescriptive. Gathering perspectives from clinicians and threat assessment professionals informed a proposed definition that uses common language to facilitate smooth communication. Professionals also came from a variety of institutional and jurisdictional including community mental health, international threat assessment contexts.

The benefits of interpreting the data, co-creating a definition, and drawing together ideas are intended to outweigh the consequences of researcher subjective interpretation and more limited transferability. Including a graduate research assistant coder throughout the initial and focused coding allowed me to gain perspective rather relying on a singular interpretation of the data. Given that we are both graduate students in the same field of study and same program, however, we also have considerable overlap in our perspectives when interpreting the data. However, my research assistant worked as a police officer for 11 years including experience as a mental health unit team lead, which broadened her perspective as a researcher and added considerably variation to how we interpreted the data. I have attached our Data Analysis Workbook and Memos (Appendix B) to establish transparency and credibility. This may also allow for resonance, such that the theory resonates with participants it claims to represent, given that at the member-checking stage I received no feedback on the theory.

Implications and Future Research

This study proposes a shared conceptual definition for grievance for threat assessment professionals. The definition provides common language for professionals to communicate about cases across contexts with consistency. The associated features, including how consuming the grievance is, their capacity to adjust, behavioral reinforcement, and the perceived threat to their way of life, allow for flexibility in describing case intensity and monitoring risk. While limitations in researcher subjectivity and transferability exist, the co-created interpretive definition resonates with previous literature and stem from pre-existing operational use.

Future research should examine how this proposed conceptual definition maps onto real cases, individual self-report, and comparative interventions with shared

grievances or extreme overvalued beliefs. Firstly, testing this proposed definition on LAGFV case files can determine what cases are discluded using this definition, or if it is too broad and provides limited additional information to the case identification or formulation. Studying threat assessment professional case files can confirm any potential discrepancies that might arise from talking about grievance in a research interview and discussing or describing it in practice. Secondly, as an extension of Cotton and Scalora (2026), analyzing self-report case file information of LAGFV can be useful in exploring whether this proposed definition of grievance is consistent with the way that grievance holders view themselves and their beliefs. This research can confirm the more internal, less observable components and features of grievance. Professional perceptions of grievance holder experiences may differ from the grievance holder's perception of their own experience.

Finally, the purpose of incorporating shared grievance in the development of this proposed conceptual grievance definition was to allow for the inclusion of related elements to best compare the potential idiosyncrasies of shared and individual grievance formation and development in future research.

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Appendix A.

Grievance Interview Guide for Threat Assessment Professionals

Defining a Grievance

1. In your professional experience, how would you define a grievance in the context of threat assessment?
2. What are the key indicators of a grievance (if prompting requested: e.g., fixation, duration, direct or implied threats)?
    i. Identification: How do you identify this indicator in your assessments?
    ii. Measurement: Can this indicator be objectively measured or tracked (e.g., frequency, intensity, behavioral markers)?
    iii. Escalation: At what point does this indicator become a critical concern requiring intervention?

Key Indicators of Escalation

3. If the following indicators weren't already mentioned, let's explore them:

    Hostile or aggressive behavior

    i. Identification: How do you identify this indicator in your assessments?
    ii. Measurement: Can this indicator be objectively measured or tracked (e.g., frequency, intensity, behavioral markers)?
    iii. Escalation: At what point does this indicator become a critical concern requiring intervention?

    Expressed intent or desire to harm

    iv. Identification: How do you identify this indicator in your assessments?
    v. Measurement: Can this indicator be objectively measured or tracked (e.g., frequency, intensity, behavioral markers)?
    vi. Escalation: At what point does this indicator become a critical concern requiring intervention?

    Duration and persistence of the grievance

    vii. Identification: How do you identify this indicator in your assessments?

viii. Measurement: Can this indicator be objectively measured or tracked (e.g., frequency, intensity, behavioral markers)?
ix. Escalation: At what point does this indicator become a critical concern requiring intervention?

Perceived injustice or victimization

x. Identification: How do you identify this indicator in your assessments?
xi. Measurement: Can this indicator be objectively measured or tracked (e.g., frequency, intensity, behavioral markers)?
xii. Escalation: At what point does this indicator become a critical concern requiring intervention?

Assessing Grievance Escalation Toward Violence

4. Are grievances required for violent behavior? When, if at all, do grievances develop prior to violent behavior?
5. What is your process for determining when a grievance shifts from a non-violent concern to a credible threat requiring intervention?

Distinguishing Grievance from Other Constructs

6. Grievance vs. Revenge: How do you differentiate between a grievance-driven threat and an individual solely wanting revenge?
7. Grievance vs. Generalized Hate: How do you distinguish a grievance from a broader sense of hate (e.g., ideological, social, or personal biases)?

Individual Grievance vs. Shared Grievance:

8. People in the field refer to individually held grievances, grievances held by groups, and extremism, what do you make of these concepts?
9. How do you identify, measure, and assess grievances shared by a group (e.g., an individual in a social media thread who is interacting with other people with extreme grievances)?

Grievance vs. Extremism:

10. Do you see individual grievances as an entry point into extremism (i.e., shared grievance), or do they follow separate trajectories?

11. How do you differentiate between a personal grievance and an individual engaging in radicalization or extremist ideologies?

Understanding Threats & Pathway to Violence

12. Do you use the "pathway to violence" framework to understand how grievances can escalate to harmful actions?
    1. If not, what approach do you use to understand how strongly held negative beliefs develop into harmful thoughts or behaviors?

Affective, Behavioral, Cognitive

13. Are any of the previously mentioned indicators affective? If so, how?
14. Are any of the previously mentioned indicators behavioral? If so, how?
15. Are any of the previously mentioned indicators cognitive? If so, how?
16. Does grievance act as a motivator for violence, or do people have a desire to be violent and then develop a grievance?

Appendix B.

Supplementary Data Analysis Codebook

All supplementary code files can be accessed at this link: https://summit.sfu.ca/item/40660

Initial and Focused Coding Workbook

Description:

Complete code repository for the initial and focused coding analysis.

Summit Link:

InitialandFocusedCodingWorkbook_DataAnalysisProtocol.zip

Memos and Category Development

Description:

Constructivist Grounded Theory Memos and Category Development

Summit Link:

Memo_Log_and_Procedure.docx

Transcripts

Description:

De-identified transcripts from interviews with threat assessment professionals, Participant 1-8.

Summit Link:

TAP_Interview_Transcripts.zip