

## Psychological Process and Pathways to Radicalization

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### Abstract

The recent emphasis on 'home-grown' terrorism has resulted in a vigorous discourse on radicalization as a process that might explain how seemingly ordinary people become terrorists. This paper explores the psychological influences, group and individual identity in young people during maturation, when transitions of identity may make them vulnerable to recruitment to violent radicalization. This paper specifically focuses on the recent phenomena of home grown terrorism in Western democracies. This requires investigation without assumptions of similarity with other global and historical acts of terrorism. Studies of terrorism have focused on those identified as engaged with terrorist organizations or convicted of terrorist crimes, with little attention given to populations that are vulnerable to recruitment to terrorist action. Therefore, this paper focuses on home grown terrorism and the psychological processes and pathways to radicalization as a pre-cursor of terrorist acts.

### Introduction

Radicalization has been defined as 'the social and psychological process of increasing commitment to extremist political or religious ideology' [1,2]. As a working hypothesis, we propose the following definition that raises questions about the process rather than just state that it exists: a process of adopting extreme religious and political beliefs in order to thwart mainstream ideologies, in the context of perceived injustice and alienation from society and the state [2,3]. Radicalization is thought to occur during adolescence or shortly afterwards among young adults who are impressionable and seek to resolve personal negotiations of identity. Typically adolescence is a period of maturation in which young people experiment with their identity, group relationships, political ideologies and their place in the world. Becoming involved in visible and distinct counter-cultures is a part of maturation so understanding the pathways to violent radicalization must take account of this maturational context and requires a distinct analysis. When related to terrorism, radicalization is conceptualised as a preliminary stage in a process that can lead to politically motivated violence. The factors involved in the early engagement of ostensibly ordinary people on the pathway to radicalization and later violent radicalization is under-researched. Silber & Bhatt undertook an analysis of Islamic radicalization for the New York City Police Department [4]. They concluded that there were several phases: pre-radicalization, self-identification, indoctrination and Jihadization. This paper focuses on the pre-radicalization processes and pathways to vulnerability drawing on the psychological and terrorism literature.

How can violent radicalization of ostensibly ordinary citizens be explained? Are they really that ordinary or have the research communities, criminologists and security agencies not fully understood the variables of potential importance? At one extreme, violent radicalization may represent an attempt to assert citizenship rights and social inclusion when faced with marginalisation or discrimination; at the other extreme it may also be the outcome of a nihilistic strategy designed to overturn the existing political system by any means possible. Whilst individual terrorists and their organizations have been subject to detailed analysis, far less is known about those vulnerable to recruitment in Muslim and non-Muslim populations in general. Without this more general background information of earlier stages of the process, it is unclear whether the small group of highly-motivated people who are willing to sacrifice their own lives in a terrorist cause really do have characteristics that can be used to mark them out from

the larger population of potential recruits. Although large samples of people have been recruited for focussed narrative studies based on a narrow definition [5,6], there is little empirical data at a population level that investigates a broad concept of pre-radicalization leading to violent radicalization, or one that acknowledges its political construction whilst making use of other research paradigms, for example, of public health responses to violence [3]

A public health response requires active engagement of the public in seeking solutions and discerning which strategies may be effective [7] Yet, there are few studies of population samples of young people of Muslim heritage that discern their attitudes and response to 'radicalization' concepts and narratives. In order to understand its root causes, research is needed into the dynamics of pathways to radicalization [8] Consequently, this paper draws on evidence from acculturation processes and the research on cultural identity of individuals and groups [9], the epidemiology of violence [10], international relations and war studies [11], religious studies [12], and contemporary behavioural and ethics research [13]. Approaching this subject from a broad theoretical base but with strong foundations in cultural epidemiology and public safety, we propose an approach that considers the attitudes and world view of those perceived to be vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization [14, 15]

### New Threats and Pathways to Radicalization

The UK is currently considered to be under threat from a 'third wave' of terrorists recruited and radicalized in the UK without direct access to al-Qaeda training camps in Pakistan or Afghanistan [8]. Although much is written on the recruitment of terrorists in the Middle East, Pakistan, and incidents in other parts of the world, this paper

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focuses on the phenomena of home grown terrorists in the Western democracies like USA, Canada, and UK and other European countries. These 'home-grown' recruits are generally composed of second-generation immigrants who received a mainstream secular education, and who have often sought out terror networks themselves first, rather than the other way around [16-18]. The first British suicide bomber, Omar Sharif, was typical of the third-generation of terrorists. Travelling to Israel, in April 2003 Sharif and his accomplice, Asif Hanif, targeted a Tel-Aviv seaside bar. Hanif successfully detonated his bomb, killing three and wounding 65, but Sharif's device failed to explode and he escaped in the confusion, only to be found dead, washed up on a beach, twelve days later. Born in Derby and recruited whilst a mathematics student at King's College London, he had little knowledge of Muslim culture or religion. Attracted to Hizb ut-Tahrir meetings at King's, he became a keen follower. Sharif married a radicalized student and dropped out of college [19,20]. This illustrates why understanding UK nationals who appear to be integrated but ultimately take up criminal acts of terrorism has become important.

Concerns about 'home grown' terrorism are now relevant to many higher income countries, including the US, Canada, and the Netherlands. Indeed, the location of radicalized groups in western democratic countries seems to reflect two important facilitative effects. First, such nations in protecting freedom of speech have failed to curtail the rhetoric of extremist groups in general which has often polarized political beliefs; secondly, some terrorist cells and radicalized groups define themselves specifically in relation to being isolated and a minority in a non-Muslim state (or non-self identified state), and this provides them with some local justifications for participating in acts of protest and violence. Furthermore, terrorist groups are of necessity clandestine and secretive; 'third-wave' or 'home-grown' terrorist cells are usually semi-autonomous or consist of isolated individuals referred to as 'self-starters' [20,21]. Without a formal hierarchy and membership structure, it is often difficult to distinguish such groups from the background population from which they have been recruited. For example, Omar Sharif, born and educated in the UK, engaged with the local population through employment or study, without a criminal record.

A critical discussion and innovative research into radicalization is necessary to explore the origins of core beliefs and whether these beliefs share attributes with other forms of, at best, protest groups and, at worst, criminal groups. Studies of young people suggest that activities at the margins of society may feel a need for a greater sense of potency and provide, through these affiliations, a strong sense of identity, albeit one that is ultimately counter-productive [22-29]. Studies of non-terrorists are necessary to fully understand the processes that might lead to support or sympathies for terrorist groups, as such support can inadvertently be seen as sanction, can fuel sources of funding, and can act as a community narrative which when encountered by a vulnerable, isolated individual in search of a more potent identity, leads to a commitment to a new group or identity; Silber and Bhatt refer to this as self identification [7].

Young people are less likely to vote or engage in political process but at the same time feel unsafe, threatened, or powerless; they may find alternative ways of asserting their views, and join political protest movements, irrespective of their initial sympathies for these causes. There may be a perception that established institutions are not working in their interest, or worse, these institutions and those in authority will not take account of their predicament or lifestyle or cherished identities and values, and so these institutions seem opposed to them and discriminate against them and their peer-group. Evidence for such

a process is shown among contemporary youths who have increasingly become alienated from mainstream social institutions, which provide value references and normative support [22,23]. Very often, a large proportion of these alienated young people come from inner city, low-income minority families that exist within a community context of disempowerment, limited access to resources, and daily violence, crime, and substance abuse [24,25]. Such youth often respond to their marginalization in ways that further distance them from positive sources of social support.

In the context of societies and cultures that has become increasingly more complex, diverse, and pluralistic, young people will need to confront challenges and make life choices that define their sense of personal identity (i.e., who am I?) and moral identity (i.e., what do I believe in?). Therefore, there are 'cognitive and emotional openings' during maturation in which extremist political ideology or a moral cause can be perceived as a virtuous and a worthy affiliation [26-28]. Furthermore, where there are communities with a strong history of civil war, political oppression, and injustice the later generations born into families carrying these stories may be vulnerable to persecutory thoughts and reacting strongly to injustice with grievances and fears [29]. Cultural history is more than context and may provide a motive for action as the examples of conflict in Palestine, Kashmir and Somalia demonstrate. The narratives of these conflicts are conveyed through family, group and community leadership (religious and secular). They offer forms of personal identity that draw on the pride of group identity, make meaning of past sacrifices, and lend themselves to acts that appear to support the survival of the group identity. Although such processes might be important for recent migrants, descendants of migrants also inherit narratives about their past that become essentialised within their sets of beliefs and values, forming a part of the self and their cultural identity.

## Cultural Identity

The development of cultural identity can be conceptualised in many ways. For example, in a model about racial identities, there are four phases: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion and internalisation [30]. This model proposes that identity negotiation does not begin until there is a critical point (of racial salience) at which the individual becomes aware of their own difference from those around him judged by certain key characteristics, in this instance physical appearance and race. Following this, further encounters with others and their ways of thinking produce cognitive and emotional strain for the individual, and lead to changes in loyalties and preferences.

Berry developed a model of identity development among migrants to Canada, which was then tested internationally among youth to establish that this model was robust in different contexts and countries [31]. He proposed five forms: a strong traditional identity (based on identification with the person's original culture, religion and in-group), a strong assimilated identity (giving up their original identity and original in-group and adopting host values and behaviours), a marginalised identity (giving up both the host and the original in-group culture), or an integrated identity (bi-cultural or multi-cultural taking on important aspects of host and original culture, without there being a constant conflict between the two).

The literature on racial and cultural identity has been applied by psychologists and sociologists to diverse religious and ethnic groups. In our work with South Asian youth in the UK, we found some unexpected findings where traditional clothing as a marker of identity was associated with less emotional distress 2 years later, especially

among young Bangladeshi girls [32]. Cultural and religious identities are not easily separated. Amongst Muslim youth, as evidenced in our work on Somali migrants (unpublished MSc thesis), Islam is a dominant and constant identity, which is strong and reassuring, and especially comforting at a time of confused identities. It offers comfort to those with emotional distress when facing adaptations in a new country, and a more unambiguous identity at a time of uncertainty. According to Berry et al., individuals who are assimilated or marginalized appear to experience the greatest amount of stress because assimilation or marginalization fail to ground a person within a single culture [33]. Hill et al. support the notion that cultural factors can at times serve either as risk or protective factors [34]. For example, higher acculturation levels are not necessarily associated with higher levels of aggression and violence if combined with higher educational levels [35]. Thus educational interventions and ensuring inclusion through education and work seem important preventive measures as part of tackling social inequalities. This is not to suggest that only those without education are vulnerable, but rather the educational content must challenge those narratives that promote inter-group violence and intergenerational conflict and trauma. Challenging such narratives is expected to reduce the impact of community narratives of inter-generationally transmitted traumas then may be used to justify or sustain inter-group violence.

Cultural identity is also related to the way individuals deal with interpersonal conflict [36]. Research has identified seven management styles that a person may use to resolve conflict: (a) integrating: attempts to reach solutions and closure, an approach that requires concern for self and others in conflict negotiation; (b) compromising: attempts to find a middle ground; (c) dominating: attempts to reach an agreement by being firm and almost stubborn; (d) avoiding: evading the problem all together; (e) neglecting: venting anger in a passive aggressive way; (f) emotional expression: reaching a solution using the 'gut' reaction; (g) third party engagement: depending on ethnicity and/or culture, seeking the advice of a familiar or impartial person. However, identities do not operate in such a predictable fashion, and multiple identities, some latent and some active, can become prominent depending on the circumstances. For example, Ting-Tommey et al. found that individuals who identify strongly with their own ethnic group use integration as a method of resolving conflict, rather than third party engagement style [36]. Yet a strong ethnic identity among African-Americans manifests as moves towards maintaining self-assurance and high self-esteem rather than the use of conflict management styles to reduce conflict. For some cultural groups in the US (such as Asians and Latinos), a strong ethnic identity acts as a protective factor against youth violence, because the culture of origin leads to avoidance of conflict. Some investigators found that a strong identification with ethnic origin was commensurate with high levels of biculturalism, and the interpersonal skills necessary to establish relationships within and outside of the cultural group [37].

Extremist ideology and/or violent protest may appeal to young, disaffected and socially isolated men and women, in search of a positive identity. Men may assert overt masculinity as a means of combating discrimination, unemployment and exclusion [5]. Furthermore, if isolated; such men may now be able to use technology to ease contact and communication and shape their identity towards extremist groups by using the internet. This, in turn, may foster a more fundamental form of Islam [5,24,38], because there is little opportunity to test radical propositions through debate or discussion either with scholars of Islam or against mainstream Muslim faith. Such extreme beliefs, born of isolation, can then negate the development of social skills to negotiate inclusion and overcome challenges without resort to violence.

Thus acculturation outcomes are crucial, as it can be helpful if reflecting an integrated identity, but where there is isolation or marginalisation of identity, these may be markers of potential for recruitment to violently radicalized causes. Young people who are either migrants themselves or are the children of migrants have to negotiate many identities: homeland, race, ethnicity, religions, language based groups, adolescence/adulthood, gender, sexuality, and many similar inter-sectional in-group and out-group identifications. Choosing identifications that foster empowerment and authority through violence may be taken up by those who are troubled by incongruent options; perhaps they are unable to negotiate a more inclusive position or do not possess the political skills to protest effectively through non-violent means. Radicalized perspectives, Islamic or otherwise can then be taken up as if a solution to the short-term psychological needs but with severe long-term consequences for society and the individual.

### Radical Islam and Radicalization Processes

A genealogy of radical Islam and some Salafi teachings justify violence against apostates, supporters of apostates and all who do not adhere to more extreme interpretations of religious faith. This, in turn, suggests that the process of radicalization and recruitment to terrorist roles occurs in a context of religious education and indoctrination [36]. However, the recent recognition of a 'third wave' terrorists, born and brought up in western democracies, with the benefits of education, calls into question the reliance on religious teachings and practices as a core process. Vidino describes the possibilities for pathways to radicalization in the Netherlands, giving a detailed description of the Hofstad group of young men, and how it grew out of isolated individuals seeking group identity, with the assistance of an older, charismatic man [40]. These groups, although not directly connected to Al-Qaeda, was still lethal. The process by which new Muslim immigrants, descendants of Muslim immigrants and converts to Islam can develop ideas about violence and terrorism including martyrdom is a necessary focus of future theorising and research.

McCauley & Moskaleiko undertake an in-depth historical analysis of terrorism, and suggest twelve processes that account for radicalization [3]: personal experiences of victimisation, political grievances, a slippery slope of developing more extreme ideas and actions and rationalising each stage before moving onto the next; the love and trust of the group, being with like-minded individuals within which people in a group tend to try and agree, avoiding isolation, competitiveness for the same resources, condensation of ideas and desires, fissuring within groups leading to polarisations being sustained and extended; ju-jitsu positioning involving action and counter-actions to destabilise and undermine the other, hatred and prejudice, and finally martyrdom as a legitimised act.

The proposed psychological processes may co-exist and lead to greater or lesser likelihood of radicalised individuals emerging. Linden and Klandermans [41] put forward other types of radicalization process: continuous from political protest and right wing activism, conversion related and sudden, and compliant in response to group pressures and charisma. These need not be directly related to religious motivations, although are often justified on religious grounds; other movements that might recruit religious rhetoric of nationalist movements for liberation, retribution or revenge for personal or group victimisation, and escape from personal problems [42]. In discussing social and psychological processes that might contribute to terrorism, Rogers et al. contrast rational decision making versus cognitive dissonance versus group

identity, and pressures to conform including the role of authoritarian personality on inflicting violence [43]. They expose a threat from inter-group dynamics and conflict, linking this to identity theory, and further propose that those committing terrorist acts are better educated and appear not be coming from poorer [15] backgrounds [42,15]. These rationalist explanations for political action are being challenged by research showing a commitment to sacred values may be driving violent radicalization [44]. However, group inequality (real or perceived) is important cause of grievance than triggers participation in violent group based political action [43]. Therefore, rational decision making may sit alongside apparently irrational decisions that is driven by perceived violations or attacks on sacred values.

Rousseau and Machouf set out how immigrant children in Canada manage the inter-group tensions and anxieties generated by the Iraq war [45]. Safe spaces for children to express their concerns, and by inference adults and parents, are needed. Such work seems especially pertinent, given that one source of grievance is a sense of assault on 'group identity' for both Muslims and non-Muslims and this assault being especially effective if it occurs at the time of a cognitive and emotional openings during the maturation process, most commonly in adolescence or young adulthood. This vulnerability is not religion specific or cause specific; for example, Sharpe used the term 'Identity Theology' to examine fundamental Christian movements and terrorism in the USA [46]. Rousseau et al. describe an increase in perceptions of discrimination in Arab Muslims who were recent immigrants to Canada, and this experience was associated with an increase in psychological distress [47]. This ambiguity between suspect community and citizen occupied by Muslim people (and other 'suspect communities') is a potential source of further grievance and inequality; if not addressed, these processes feed perceptions of injustice and ill treatment of those 'associated' with Islam, and holding any form of pride, or sympathy for Muslim values and heritage.

Few people have asked the public of Muslim heritage what they think is a helpful response and how they feel about such acts and threats. Partnership with populations assumed to be vulnerable to emergent radicalization should be a key counter-terrorist task, not as a secret form of gathering intelligence but by involving the public as trusted partners in the war on terror and in the generation of evidence; this is also important for social cohesion and for building confidence in state policies in culturally diverse societies in which individual freedoms are not curtailed [21]. Terrorism can lead to reactive efforts to introduce more security measures that limit freedom and place people under many different types of restrictions; greater airport security, stop and search procedures if stereotypical profiles are met. Criticism of Islamic fundamentalism can extend to criticism of Islam and Muslims more generally; a recent development is the restriction in some countries of dress codes known to be associated with Islam and the prohibition of religious symbols in work settings. These reactions may be so severe or introduced without sufficient explanation and justification as to enlist support from people with moderate political views and actions as they feel victim to an unjust response [1,2,21]. Such processes contribute to the transitions facing young people and their cognitive and emotional openings being exploited by recruitment to radicalized beliefs and actions with potentially lethal outcomes [40].

## Conclusions

This paper has explored the complex processes hypothesised to explain how a young law-abiding citizen is transformed into violent political activist, one so determined that he or she is willing to sacrifice

their own life at a time when they have abundant capacity for further growth and experience [36]. Evidence gathered from cultural psychiatry, anthropology and political science suggests that further research has to take an interdisciplinary form. At their core, studies need to explore the problems faced by young people who encounter difficulties in negotiating a robust sense of identity. It is suggested that the path to violent radicalization is more attractive to those who have failed to develop skills to negotiate rights. Without a sense of entitlement, such individuals have often failed to understand or appreciate the responsibilities and benefits that are associated with participation in a democratic society. Research and policies to tackle injustice, inequality and prejudice are essential to remedy the exploitation of cognitive and emotional openings that are part of maturation and the negotiations of which are how people define themselves and give meaning to their contributions to society.

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