

Why so Radical: The Psychology of Process of Radicalization

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Abstract

The examination of studies on radicalization reveals that international major events have shaped the related research and studies. For instance, prior to September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, terrorism studies had been rather marginal area of study in various disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, and political science but after the 9-11, terrorism researchers and experts became celebrities overnight (Maskaliunaite, 2015). London bombings in July 2005 is another example, after which “radicalization” became a new buzz word as officials and public were wondering how four seemingly ordinary British citizens turned into suicide bombers and targeted civilians. Given that there are many attacks around the World, it is not surprising that after each attack policy makers and security services have been turning to researchers and experts to understand why such events are taking place in order to explore the ways to prevent future incidents from happening. Public also seeking answer to the question of “why do they hate us?”. Terrorist attacks are mainly carried out by radical individuals and that many of these individuals act in terrorist groups, but there are some questions still remain unanswered such as “whether all radicals are terrorists?” and “how to deal with different type of radicalization?”. I argue that psychological perspective on process of radicalization may assist the policy makers and public answer some of the above questions. The objective of this paper is threefold. Firstly, examining the concept of radicalization, in order to provide operational definition of radicalization. Secondly, summarizing process of radicalization based on individual variables and group-level decision making strategies along with the wider political and social context in which radicalization occurs. Thirdly, reviewing the two pyramids model (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2017) in order to provide a practical framework for the examination of political radicalization.

Keywords: psychology of radicalization, relative deprivation, terrorism, two pyramids model of political radicalization, terror management theory, social identity theory.

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Concept of Radicalization

Many text books on terrorism acknowledge that there is no universally accepted definition of the concept and that this is one of the major obstacles for the advancement of the field (Stampnitzky, 2014). The concept of “radicalization” also shares this problem with no universally accepted definition. In the most general way, the interest of radicalization stems from the interest in stopping acts of terrorism. From this perspective, radicalization may be defined, as “what goes on before the bomb goes off” (Neumann, 2008). However, this definition is too general to provide us with operational definition of the concept. In the following section, I will review distinct features of the concept of “radicalization”, which distinguish it from other similar concepts.

The traditional definition of radicalism, for instance in the Oxford dictionary, is that “the beliefs or actions of people who advocate thorough or complete political or social reform”, (“Radicalism” in Oxford Dictionary Online, n.d.) which has a broad meaning, similar to activism. However, within the current contexts, researchers tend to see it more specifically as a path to terrorism, progressive drift into extremism, or a movement towards justifying violence against civilians and finally personally engaging in it (Maskaliunaite, 2015). According to Pisiou (2012) what makes radicalism distinct is that “radicalism is a political ideology, with the objective of inducing sweeping change based on fundamental or ‘root’ principles”. This definition emphasizes fundamentalist or sweeping change of radicalism but does not include the potential for violence. Fundamentalism has been less frequently used in connection to the outcomes of radicalization. Nevertheless, adaptation of fundamentalist beliefs is linked with a stage of radicalization.

The concept of fundamentalism comes from the domain of religion, more specifically, the Protestant movement in early twentieth century the U.S., rooted in the “generalized anti-modern and anti liberal mentality” (Carpenter, 1997). However, fundamentalism is not necessarily violent and in many cases does not always lead to forcing such beliefs on others by way of force or violence.

Another concept frequently used in connection with radicalization is extremism. Schmid (2013) states that “extremists strive to create a homogeneous society based on rigid, dogmatic ideological tenets; they strive to make society conformist by suppressing all opposition and subjugating minorities. In general terms, extremism is similar to radicalization in relation to being strict, rigid, and biased position; extremism is frequently seen as being against democratic customs, human rights, and acceptance.

Many current researchers see radicalization is a process but they do not agree on where that process originates, how it develops or where it leads, or even whether it is a linear and orderly progress. For instance, European Commission describes it as “socialization to extremism, which manifest itself in terrorism” (European Commission Expert Group, 2008). The U.S. Department of Homeland Security defines it as a “process of adopting an extremist belief system, including willingness to support or use violence as a method to effect social change (Homeland Security Institute, 2006). As it can be seen with the above definitions, the basic concern in relation to radicalization is the concern of people turning to violence to effect a political change.

For the purpose of this article, radicalization will be defined as “a process, not necessarily linear or orderly, by which an individual accepts belief and value systems that justify the use of violence against civilians to realize a social change and actively supports it or engage in violent means for political purposes.

Thus, the concept of radicalization is recognized as a dual process; radicalization of opinions, involving cognitive and emotional aspects, and radicalization of actions, relating to behaviours and acts. Radicalization is an often slow and gradual process, not necessarily linear, with the final result of some individuals participating in a violent campaign to effect social change. In the following part, psychology of process of radicalization will be examined.

Process of Radicalization

Psychological approaches to process of radicalization include various competing approaches with different explanations of what causes radicalization. In general, these theories may be categorised as individual level approaches and group process approaches. While individual level approaches such as psychoanalytic approach, focusing on stable or dynamic factors, and group process theories, including interpersonal level theories, taking dynamic views and focus on processes and phases.

Individual Level Theories

Occasionally some people argue that those who display radical violent political activities in general are insane or psychologically abnormal. However, this theory has long been rejected by researchers as groundless. For instance, Ferracuti (1998) stated that “psychiatric studies have not identified any psychopathological characteristics common to the Italian left-wing radical terrorists, similar findings were also confirmed in case of German leftists’ terrorists (Post, 1998). General findings of psychological traits of radicalization studies is that those who involve in terrorist acts are “more like us than we ordinarily care to admit” (Rubenstein, 1987) and that psychopathology is not more likely in terrorists than among non-terrorist individuals with similar background (Crenshaw, 1981). Furthermore, poverty is not a practical explanation of radicalization (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2017).

However, particularly in law enforcement, attempts to profile potential terrorists based on individual variables have not stopped, in which frequently three standards have been used: racial-physical, psycho-pathological, and socio-economic characteristics (Rae, 2012). These types of profiling may particularly be problematic as it is discriminatory and borders on racism, criminalizing entire communities. For instance, the New York Police Department report on radicalization defines radical individuals as “particularly vulnerable” to step on the ladder that leads to terrorist attacks: 15 to 35 year-old male Muslims who live in male-dominated societies” (NYPD, 2007). This type of categorization may appear to be practical for law enforcement proposes but it has way too high type 1 error level to have realistic value. In reality, some radicals and terrorists may well fit into this definition but there are too many individuals, fitting into this definition, nevertheless; who do not hold radical views or display radical acts, bringing about too many false hits with identifying potential radical individuals. This particular report was moreover criticized for its attempt to turn entire communities into suspects (Huq, 2010).

Dalgaard-Nielsen (2008) summarizes three pathways of potentially productive examination into individual psychology that could assist to determine the causes leading to radicalization: psychodynamic approaches, identity theory and cognitive approaches.

Psychodynamic approach turns to narcissism, paranoia hypotheses and are based on the Freudian tradition of psychoanalysis, the link of violence to past traumatic events. Identity theory argues that for young individuals in search of identity, ideologies help in identity formation and “joining terrorist groups can act as a strong ‘identity stabilizer’ providing these young persons with a sense of belonging and purpose (Dalgaard- Nielsen, 2008). Lastly, according to cognitive theory there is a potential link between cognitive style and individual’s disposition to engage in terrorist acts.

These explanations of radicalization, psychological profiling of radicalization, may appear to be promising to identify potential terrorists. However, success of such endeavours have not led to successful application as individuals engaged in terrorist organizations are too wide to lead to any meaningful generalizable results (Maskaliunaite, 2015).

Moghaddam (2005) suggested a metaphor of radicalization as a six-floor narrowing stairway to terrorism. According to this view, the ground level consists of perception of injustice and relative deprivation (Gurr, 1970); the first level is search for options; the second level is anger at perceived culprits of injustice; the third level is moral component that justifies terrorism; the fourth level is joining a terrorist group; the final level is dehumanizing enemy civilians that perceive them as valid target of violence. This model is at the individual level; in which each floor must be passed through in order to get to the higher floor, and the order of floors is fixed (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). This model consists of a dual process model of radicalization: justifying terrorism (third level) and joining a terrorist group (fourth level) is the difference between radical thoughts and beliefs (cognitive and emotional) and radical actions (behavioral).

Furthermore, an alternative approach, striving to answer the question of as to why only a minority of those individuals who are exposed to the same overall political and socioeconomic factors turn to terrorism, are theories examining group processes and group dynamics in relation to radicalization.

Group Level Theories

As oppose to individual level theories, these approaches do not investigate innate or inner traits, but instead examine how particular social processes may lead to “normal” individuals to hold extraordinary beliefs or carry out violent acts (Dalgaard- Nielsen, 2009).

According to this perspective, the key to radicalization is in the mechanisms such as socialization, bonding, and peer pressure, group decision making processes within small groups nested within a wider violent subcultures. These mechanisms are claimed to gradually permit the members to overcome normal inhibitions against harming other individuals. Especially younger individuals often experience a profound need for identity and belonging, which can be fulfilled by a closely knit group (Levine, 1999). Once an individual is a member of a social group, processes such as ideological propaganda, repetitive behaviour, and peer pressure can create tendency for violence. In accordance with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as radical group identity gradually becomes more important than individual identity, in-group responsibility morally becomes more important than individual responsibility, where normal individual constraints on behaviour is replaced by the in-group responsibility and constraints. In the process of socialization in radical groups, isolation and group competition might also reinforce in-group bounding and permit dehumanization of out-group members, including civilians, who are the target of the radical groups' violence.

Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) is a theory that include individual, group, and wider political and social level analysis: all individuals who identify with a group will react to violence against their group with amplified commitment to their group and increased support for violence against those who are perceived to threaten to their group (Pyszczynski, Motyl, & Abdollahi, 2009). One of the founders of TMT claimed that both radical violence and government response to terrorist violence are influenced by how individuals deal with the threat of mortality (Pyszczynski, Motyl, & Abdollahi, 2009). The concept of "terror" in TMT is an existential terror: fear of dying. A group identity can assist individuals to deal with this fear with the prospect of immortality for noble members of a group that will last indefinitely in time.

Threats to one's group, particularly violent attacks that kill in-group members, therefore lead to increased thoughts of death (mortality salience) and increased commitment to the in-group values (cultural anxiety buffer). The result is heightened support for violence against the enemy threat. Empirical research results support this view, in which increased thoughts of mortality increased Iranian individuals' support for martyrdom missions against the US and increased U.S. conservatives' support for using extreme military measures, such as using atom bomb to kill terrorists (Pyszczynski, Motyl, & Abdollahi, 2009).

Pyszczynski et al. (2009) argued for the dynamic of action and reaction process that links terrorist attacks and government responses:

“Research is presented which suggests that many of the same psychological forces that lead terrorists to their violent actions also lead to counterterrorist policies that create massive collateral damage. This collateral damage appears to further escalate the cycle of violence and may aid the targets of those attacks in recruiting people for the terrorist cause” (p.12).

The case studies that associate radicalization with individual attitudes and emotions (microlevel) and group dynamics (mesolevel) is abundant (Porta, 2013). Across the complex association of levels in these case studies, the major insight is that radicalization occurs in the dynamics of actions and reactions in conflicts between activists and law-enforcement, as well as in conflict between competing activist groups (Porta, 2013). In this perspective, radicalization to violence occurs as a result of escalating conflict, particularly when non-violent activism is blocked or failing (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2017).

Some researches criticize defining *radicalization* as a “process”, as such it is perceived as a social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology; this conceptualization implies that radicalization is some kind

of orderly and linear progression. However; as Taylor and Horgan (2006) stated course of this kind of dynamic (actions of and reactions of radical individuals and law-enforcement) is anything but linear and orderly. For instance, Hafez and Mullins (2015) admit that few radical ideas ever move to violent actions, and they differentiate radicalization of ideas (justifying violence for a common goal) from radicalization of actions (participating in terrorist attacks). They recognized four variables have come together to produce radical violent actions: grievance, networks, ideology, and violence enabling environment (Hafez & Mullins, 2015). This conceptualization of radicalization focuses small group radicalization or joining existing radical terrorist groups but it does not have much to say in relation to lone-wolf radicals, who do not have connection with a violent group or do not carry out acts as a member of a radical group.

Lastly, examining the radicalization of public opinion on both sides of intergroup conflict can benefit by more attention to psychological research on group-based emotions (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000), especially moral emotions (Rozin et al., 1999). Matsumoto, Hwang, and Frank (2012) have argued for the potential of this kind of research, indicating the importance of anger, fear, shame, and disgust in relation to radicalization. Studies by Matsumoto and his colleagues (2012) have revealed, for example, that speeches by world leaders and ideological group leaders show enhanced anger, contempt, and disgust before commencing acts of aggression toward perceived enemies.

The Two-Pyramids Model

When terrorism became too challenging to predict, researchers focused on “radicalization” with an assumption that if radicalization is rooted out terrorism will be indirectly dealt with, as there are more people who are radicalized than individuals involved in terrorism (Horgan, 2012).

The issue with this approach is at least two fold. Firstly, not all individuals who hold radical beliefs and attitudes engage in illegal activities. Secondly, not all of those who carry out terrorist violent acts necessarily have radical beliefs and attitudes. The second point is supported by research showing how counterinsurgency and counterterrorism may result in “accidental guerillas”. Thus, persistent question in terrorism studies is whether radical beliefs and attitudes results in violent act; it seems while they often do, it is not always the case (Horgan, 2012). The recognition of distinction between radical ideas and radical violent acts have practical implications. Targeting ideas may result in backlash, as happened with the U.S. Muslim groups opposing the (currently suspended) FBI website intended to help schools and students identify individuals flirting with violent radicalism (Goodstein, 2015). As many experts have recognized, state overreactions to radical terrorist threat (collateral damage, escalated policing, jujitsu politics) may create new threats (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011).

The two-pyramids model provides us with a practical conceptual framework to tackle the aforementioned issues that radical violent ideas are not the same as radical violent acts and that perceiving and reacting both as the same process creates new threats. According to the two-pyramid model, radicalization to extremist beliefs and attitudes is psychologically different than radicalization to extremist violent acts (Borum, 2011). Research in social psychology has long made it clear that attitudes do not easily result in actions. For instance, Wicker (1969), in his influential literature review, stated that “Taken as whole, these studies suggest that it is considerably more likely tat attitudes will be unrelated or only slightly related to overt behaviours than attitudes will be closely related to actions” (p.65).

The very weak relationship between attitude and actions particularly clear in relation to extreme behaviours. For instance, Rudd (1989) found that 45% of college students reported suicidal thoughts, but only 5% ever attempted suicide.

Furthermore, 91% of college students reported homicidal thoughts in one study (Duntley, 2005), but fortunately only a small minority ever act on these fantasies. Similarly anger and frustration about group discrimination seldom translates into violent radical acts (Klandermans, 1997). In line with research on attitude and behaviour, the two-pyramids model of radicalization conceptually distinguishes radicalization of opinions from radicalization of actions (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017).

Opinion Pyramid

At the foundation of this pyramid are people who do not care about a political (group) or cause (neutral); higher in the pyramid are those who believe in the group cause but do not justify violence (sympathizers); higher in the pyramid are those individuals who justify violence in defense of the group cause, and at the top of the pyramid are those who feel a personal moral duty to take up violence in defense of the group cause (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017).

According to polling data over half of Muslims in the U.S and the U.K. believe that the war on terrorism is a war on Islam, and about 5% of Muslims see suicide bombing sometimes justified in defence of Islam (McCauley, 2013). Clearly, if one sees these individuals same as those who are in the action pyramid, as summarized above, this perception makes tackling the issue of radicalization more complicated and may potentially create “accidental guerillas”.

Action Pyramid

At the foundation of this pyramid, there are individuals who are not acting for a political group or cause (inert); higher in the pyramid are those who carry out legal group action for the cause (activists); higher in the pyramid are the ones who engaged in illegal

activities for the group cause (radicals); and at the top of the pyramid are the ones who carry out illegal action that target civilians (terrorists) (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). It needs to be noted that this is not an orderly or linear stairway model; individuals may skip levels in moving up and down in one of the pyramids or between pyramids. There is also empirical evidence supporting the distinction between second (activists) and third (radicals) in the action pyramid. Furthermore, a relatively recent study, categorizing 15 extremist groups, in accordance to the pyramid model and based on their history of violent acts as activists, radicals, or terrorists, revealed little difference between activist and radical groups but a profound difference between radical and terrorist groups with greater power motive and less cognitive complexity in terrorist groups (Suedfeld et al., 2013).

Conclusion

It is strange that the differences between attitude and behaviour have underlined in every psychology textbook, yet the distinction has not been clear in research to understand radical and terrorist violence. The main point of this paper is that the association between attitudes (including opinions and beliefs) and violent actions in relation to radicalization is generally weak. Consistent with this point, radical opinions are neither required nor sufficient for radical violence (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017).

In sum, the process of radicalization is not linear or orderly process. Dealing with radical attitudes and beliefs call for different set of skills than does fighting radical terrorists. Increased policing and suspending rights in the face of radical terrorist attacks may escalate sympathy and support for radical violence. For instance, French parliament declared state of emergency as a result of the November 2015 attacks, which was inspired by the DAESH. Nossiter (2015) reported that after the attacks “All over France.... the police have been breaking down doors, conducting searches without warrants, and aggressively questioning

residents, hauling suspects to police stations and putting others under house arrest (para. 1). The targets of this escalated law-enforcement were mainly Muslims, giving the DAESH the jujitsu politics that is striving to convince 20 million Muslims all over Europe for the cause of DAESH (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). As indicated earlier, fighting with ideas and attitudes rather than actions may multiply sympathizers of radical terrorist organizations.

Lastly, even though, a rational choice framework, which argue that individuals make rational decisions based on loss and gain calculation related to their actions, is still very influential in relation to research on radicalization; there is growing recognition of the importance of emotions and affective experience in understanding political radicalization (Matsumoto, Hwang, and Frank, 2012). I argue that research on radicalization can benefit both conceptually and operationally from investigating both radicalization of opinion and radicalization of action as distinct processes within the framework of the two-pyramid model.

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