
Clarifying the Explanatory Context for Developing Theories of Radicalization: Five Basic Considerations¹

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Abstract

We know a great deal more about the process of radicalization leading to violence than when the term entered the popular lexicon a few years after 9/11. Yet fundamentally, it remains difficult to specify who will turn to political violence, how, or why. Progress on this key issue depends on many developments. This article reviews and analyses five basic meta-methodological insights, on which there is growing consensus, which set the parameters for the ongoing study and modeling of radicalization: (1) the specificity problem; (2) the shift from profiles to process; (3) the necessity of a multi-factorial approach; (4) the heterogeneity problem; and (5) the primary data problem. The objective is to create a stronger understanding of the nature and collective relevance of these accepted insights, and point to two related emergent issues on which more systematic research still needs to be done in the context of combatting terrorism: the relationship of attitudes and behavior, and the problem of accounts (i.e., the critical and contextual study of how people justify or excuse socially undesirable or problematic behavior and occurrences).

Article History

Received Jan 25, 2019
Accepted Mar 8, 2019
Published Mar 29, 2019

Keywords: Radicalization, Theories of Radicalization, Violent Extremism, Methodological Issues, Talking to Terrorists

Introduction

Understanding radicalization remains a core concern of terrorism studies and the worldwide effort to implement programs to counter and prevent extremist violence. In the last decade, we have made significant progress in understanding the factors contributing to the process of

¹ This analysis emerged from a larger body of work generously supported by the Community Resilience Fund (Public Safety Canada), under Grant # 8000-18875. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of the manuscript for their insightful comments and suggestions for improving this article.

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radicalization leading to violence. Yet the overall discussion remains somewhat inchoate, in part because of the intrinsic complexity of the phenomenon. Progress, moreover, on the development of a model of radicalization has slowed. Perhaps this is because of a heightened cognizance of the challenges. A careful reading of the diverse literature on the issue indicates, however, that there is a growing consensus on a few key insights that provide the meta-theoretical or meta-methodological parameters for further research.³ These insights have emerged from case studies, historical studies, theoretical and quantitative analyses, and it would be helpful to clarify and emphasize them.

In this regard, this analysis is not referring to specific conclusions drawn from existing theories of radicalization or syntheses of the empirical research (e.g., Wiktorowicz, 2005; Moghaddam, 2005; Silber and Bhatt, 2007; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Sageman, 2011; Hafez and Mullins, 2015; Dawson, 2017a); nor is it specifically about the results of methodological critiques of the research literature on terrorism (e.g., Silke 2008; Gordon 2010; Young and Findley 2011; Schuurman 2018) or more specifically radicalization (e.g., Sedgwick 2010; Neumann and Kleinmann 2013). Both bodies of knowledge influence the analysis, but the focus is more delimited and different. At issue is a set of more general conclusions that have emerged from the full body of research on the process of radicalization. These basic insights set the explanatory context for developing future theories and models. In tackling the problem of radicalization, consideration needs to be given to the following five basic sub-issues:

- (1) The Specificity Problem
- (2) The Shift from Profiles to Process
- (3) The Necessity of a Multi-factorial Approach
- (4) The Heterogeneity Problem
- (5) The Primary Data Problem

³ The study addresses dominant trends in the research. Some exceptions can always be identified, and some are discussed in the article.

Most researchers in the field of terrorism studies will have some familiarity with these issues. They are interlinked, theoretically and practically, and have evolved with the area of study. In the research literature, however, they appear in scattered, fragmentary, overlapping ways.

The issues warrant more exhaustive treatment than is possible in this limited context, and this study makes no claims to being comprehensive. The objective is simply to create a stronger understanding of the nature and collective relevance of these foundational considerations. Distinguishing the issues brings a greater measure of analytical order to the ongoing study of radicalization, and discipline to the use of this information in countering terrorism and violent extremism. Their integrated examination also points to a repeated return to the first and pivotal problem: the specificity of explanations of radicalization. As Sageman (2014) and others (e.g., Taylor and Horgan, 2006; Kurzman 2011; Bartlett and Miller, 2012; Dawson, 2014) have asserted, this is the key consideration for assessing progress in understanding the turn to violent extremism, even if it is often overlooked in the pursuit of new data and theoretical insights.

The analysis is a distillation of insights acquired from years of reading about radicalization, making presentations on the topic to a diverse array of academic, government, and public audiences, and interviewing a sample of Western foreign fighters, and their families and friends (Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017; Amarasingam and Dawson, 2018). The insights are not the result of a quantitative systematic review of the terrorism literature. In presenting this analysis I have purposefully aimed for a certain simplicity. The objective is to offer a primer on the issues, one that will be comprehended equally well by specialists, novices to the field of research, and counter-terrorism practitioners. It is important that everyone grasps the veracity and significance of these basic considerations and their relevance for understanding and preventing violent extremism. Lastly, while the focal point of this analysis is the generic process of radicalization, much of the pertinent literature specifically addresses the threat posed by jihadism, and that emphasis appears here as well.

(1) The Specificity Problem

At the core of all analyses of the process of radicalization, whether conceptual or through case studies, is the problem of specificity (e.g., Della Porta, 1988, p. 157; Silke, 1998, p. 54; Horgan, 2005 pp. 83-84, 101; Taylor and Horgan, 2006, p. 588; King and Taylor, 2011, p. 612; Bartlett and Miller, 2012). Put simply, whenever we encounter an explanation of why some person or group has engaged in terrorism, we need to ask if the causal factors identified are sufficiently specific to explain why that person or group engaged in violence, since, more often than not, the factors apply equally well to a wider set of individuals who did not become violent. It is common, for example, to attribute terrorist acts to grievances held by the perpetrators. In the obvious case of the Arab-Israeli conflict, for example, Palestinian groups have long justified the use of terrorism by presenting it as a response to the illegitimate Israeli occupation of lands they once inhabited. The problem is, while this political grievance undoubtedly plays a strong motivational role in the case of Palestinian suicide bombers, the grievance is shared by millions of other Palestinians and hence insufficient to account for the minority of people who join terrorist organizations, let alone die as martyrs for the cause. Clearly much more is at play, and no matter how many variables are considered, the specificity question should be brought to bear. It is 'the' litmus test for assessing the credibility of explanations of the process of radicalization leading to violence (Sageman, 2014).⁴

The test is not unique to terrorism studies, since it applies to almost all inquiries about the reasons and motivations for actions. What accounts, for example, for something as mundane as choosing a career? The answer is rarely as clear as it might appear, and usually depends on an array of influences and conditions that far exceed the simple decision to

⁴ Another way of capturing this issue is the criticism that terrorism research is too often guilty of "selecting on the dependent variable." In seeking to explain the determinants of radicalization, for instance, researchers have tended to study only those who have become violent extremists. Without a comparison group or control group, let say of those exposed to similar conditions who did not become violent, it is difficult to tell if the dependent variable, violent extremism, is specifically the result of the factors detected (the possible independent variables).

become an accountant, graphic artist, or teacher. Of course, when we are dealing with terrorism the specificity problem is more acute and urgent. The explanations developed are designed to play a role in stopping acts of mass violence. In this explanatory context, the specificity problem is also magnified by other challenges facing anyone attempting to explain the process of radicalization. Paradoxically, on the one hand, awareness of each of these additional challenges helps to ameliorate the specificity problem, since it adds to our knowledge of the full set of variables that may be relevant to explaining the radicalization of individuals. On the other hand, this expanded awareness compounds the specificity problem by adding to the scope and complexity of the explanatory variables potentially involved, interacting in diverse ways, to different degrees, in the radicalization of any individual. The specificity concern can be raised with regard to each variable and the various patterns of their interaction.

In recent years, one aspect of the larger specificity problem has come to the fore: many people may engage in extremist talk, but few act on it. Talk alone, it seems, is a poor indicator of the potential to engage in political violence (Sageman, 2011, p. 117; Borum, 2011, p. 30; Bartlett and Miller, 2012; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2014, p. 72 and McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017, p. 211; Schuurman and Eijkman, 2015, pp. 7–8; Sageman, 2017, pp. 80–81). Consequently, some researchers draw a distinction between “attitudes supportive of political violence” and “behaviors contributing to political violence” (Khalil, 2014), or “cognitive radicalization” and “behavioral radicalization” (Borum, 2011; Neumann, 2013), arguing that in seeking to counter terrorism, too often the former is inaccurately mistaken for the latter (Vidono, 2010; Horgan and Taylor, 2011, p. 174; Sageman, 2011, p. 17 and 2017, p. 90).

Amongst the strongest proponents of this distinction are Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko (2014, 2017). They have elaborated a “two pyramid” model of radicalization: differentiating between a model that traces the development of extreme “opinions”, and one which detects and tracks the turn to increasingly extreme “actions.” This dualistic model of radicalization operates on the premise “that radicalization to extremist opinions is

psychologically a different phenomenon from radicalization to extremist actions” (2017: 211). They propose that the progression from a “neutral” attitude to a sense of “personal moral obligation” in the opinion model, can be detected through the use of polling data. The parallel but different progression, from an “inert” orientation to political action to being a “terrorist,” in the action model, requires the application of various psychological scales, including ones that differentiate between “activist intentions” and “radical intentions” (2017: 212). At this juncture the merits of this dual approach remain relatively unexplored, and some scholars question the value of redirecting so much attention to behavioral or action indicators alone in detecting violent extremism (e.g., Vidino 2010; Neumann 2013; Koehler, 2017; Dawson and Amarasingam 2017). Doing so has the advantage of reducing the number of false positives in the identification of potential terrorists, but it is hard to discount the fairly obvious relationship, in many cases, between holding radical ideas and engaging in extreme actions.

Nevertheless, some scholars have gone further in driving a wedge between attitudes and behavior in the context of radicalization to violence. They assert that “not every terrorist is necessarily ‘radical’ (i.e., holding politically or religiously extreme views, as opposed to engaging in violent behavior)” (Horgan and Taylor, 2011: 174; McCauley and Moskalenko 2017: 211). James Khalil (2014), for instance, argues that behaviors contributing to political violence might be driven by the pursuit of economic gain, status, or adventure seeking, and in some cases by fear and coercion, and not ideological commitments. He illustrates this with some evidence from the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. Similarly, John Venhaus (2010: 8) argues that most of the young men who left their homes to be trained by al-Qaeda abroad were primarily seeking revenge, status, identity, and thrills, and only became hardened jihadists after being formally indoctrinated by al-Qaeda in training camps. At this time, however, we have no real idea how common these alternative motivations are for engaging in terrorism, and especially for Western jihadists and foreign fighters. We simply lack sufficient evidence. In each case, moreover, it remains an open question whether the non-ideological motivations specified are influenced by the more informal and continuous forms of exposure to ideology typical of most jihadists. This exposure may explain why the pursuit of material

benefits, status, and thrills leads to becoming a jihadist, rather than a member of the armed forces or a criminal. These are questions that have yet to be adequately investigated by researchers.

In the end, in making inferences about how and why individuals have radicalized, it is difficult to see how we can avoid relying on what people have to say about their motivations and actions (i.e., accessing their attitudes and drawing inferences). In doing so, however, great care must be taken to treat what people say with appropriate circumspection (Horgan, 2005, pp. 88-90; Horgan, 2008a; Speckhard, 2009; Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017, pp. 12-15; Khalil, 2017; Nilsson, 2018).

(2) The Shift from Profiles to Process

In the face of a mounting threat from jihadist terrorism, post 9/11, renewed attention was given to the effort to create a terrorist profile. The urgent need to interdict and counter terrorist plots drove a desire to differentiate terrorists, and even better potential terrorists, from the rest of the population. While not commonly conceived in this way, this was one of the first contexts in which the problem of specificity arose in terrorism studies (Silke, 1998, p. 54).

Given the heinous nature of the crimes perpetrated by terrorists, it was assumed these individuals must, like other kinds of exceptionally violent offenders, be different from the rest of us. Criminal profiles had been developed and used widely by law enforcement (Kocsis, 2006), and the notion that violent offenders (e.g., mass murders, serial arsonists, paedophiles) can be profiled is pervasive in popular culture (Gladwell, 2007; MacMillan, 2017). The development of a terrorist profile seemed plausible, no matter how suspect the results seemed to be when tested scientifically (Eastwood et al., 2006; Bourque et al., 2009; Chifflet, 2014). Through the careful examination of case studies, and the development of datasets, it was assumed that common traits and patterns of behavior could be detected to identify who is, or might become, a terrorist. Success in generating a profile would go a long ways towards resolving the general problem of specificity when it comes to terrorism.

The three most prominent approaches to profiling, as Jonathan Rae notes (2012, p. 1), used “racial-physical, psychopathological and socioeconomic” parameters. Profiles based on racial and physical features, however, lacked the specificity required to effectively identify actual terrorists, while stereotyping whole populations (e.g., Muslims or Arabs) in morally and politically problematic ways.

The psychological approach, based on identifying the shared psychological problems or personality traits of terrorists, appeared more promising. “Terrorist violence is so unusual and runs so contrary to the accepted standards of society,” Andrew Silke observes, “... it seems to suggest psychological anomaly” (1998, p. 52). Consequently, repeated efforts have been made to correlate terrorism with diagnosable psychopathologies or personality disorders (Silke, 1998; Victoroff, 2005; Horgan, 2005; Kruglanski and Fishman, 2006). In the end, however, the traits and behaviors proposed were either too vague or ambiguous, or insufficiently present in the sample of known terrorists.

Terrorists have been linked with antisocial, narcissistic, and paranoid personality disorders, and other kinds of borderline and mixed conditions (e.g., Truco, 1987; Johnson and Feldman, 1992). Yet, as one of the most prominent scholars of terrorism, Martha Crenshaw, concluded long ago, the limited data available suggests that the most “outstanding characteristic” of terrorists is their “normality” (1981, p. 390). Overall, Silke concludes, “the research supporting terrorist abnormality has been sparse and of questionable validity. In contrast, the research suggesting terrorist normality has been more plentiful, and in general, of much greater scientific validity” (1998, p. 62). This does not mean that some terrorists are not suffering from diagnosable or other less definitive forms of mental illness. Rather, as Victoroff concludes, the research literature shows that terrorists “are psychologically extremely heterogeneous. Whatever [their] stated goals and group of identity, every terrorist, like every person, is motivated by [their] own complex of psychosocial experiences and traits” (2005, p. 35).

In seeking to develop a psychological profile of terrorist, then, the pendulum has swung from an assumption of some kind of association between abnormality and terrorism to

a near complete dismissal of such an association.⁵ In recent years, however, more methodologically sophisticated approaches are generating findings that are pushing the pendulum back to the middle (e.g., Gill, Horgan, and Deckert, 2014; Corner and Gill, 2015; Corner, Gill and Mason, 2016). Despite continued popular pressure to dismiss terrorists as “crazy,” few scholars now expect to find a clear relationship between one, or a few psychological disorders, and even specific acts of terrorism. Rather the focus is on developing a more refined, complex, and heterogeneous conception of the correlations between an array psychological issues and different manifestations of terrorism. Paul Gill and Emily Corner have developed bigger and better datasets that disaggregate the information available on terrorists and types of terrorism, distinguish and track a wider array of behavioral indicators, and employ more sophisticated statistical analyses. Their research is marked by a more discerning and critical approach to the claims often made about the mental health issues of specific terrorists (e.g., Gill, Horgan, and Deckert, 2014; Corner and Gill, 2015; Corner, Gill and Mason, 2016; Corner and Gill 2017). Amongst other things, their research has documented that mental health issues have played a larger, but still less than anticipated, role in instances of lone actor terrorism than group-based terrorism,⁶ and that amongst lone actors mental illness is more prevalent with single issue forms of terrorism (e.g., animal-rights, anti-abortion) than jihadist or extreme right-wing terrorism (Corner and Gill, 2015, pp. 30-31). Overall, though, the prevalence of mental disorders amongst group-based terrorists is markedly lower than in the general population. Other researchers are seeking to understand, more precisely and systematically, how specific mental disorders may play a role in

⁵ Some studies continue to posit a strong link between mental health problems and terrorism. In his search of the Dutch National Police database for evidence of mental disorder, mental disability, and “problem behavior” for known and suspected jihadist foreign fighters, for example, Anton Weenink (2015) concluded that there is a significantly disproportionate history of mental health and behavioral problems in this group. Similarly, Paulussen, Nijman and Lismont (2017) report that a review of medical files indicated that “approximately (but probably more) 60% of suspected jihadi radicals ... had a history of mental health issues” (p. 7). Both studies, however, have some significant methodological limitations, not least of which is the use of very broad conceptions of mental health issues and problem behavior.

⁶ “The odds of a lone-actor terrorist having a mental illness is 13.49 times higher than the odds of a group actor having a mental illness” (Corner and Gill, 2015, p. 23).

instigating and facilitating acts of violent extremism (e.g., Alley and Faccini, 2018). New research, then, is improving our grasp of who is radicalizing and perhaps, in part at least, why, but systematic reviews of the literature suggest the data available is far too preliminary and fragmentary to draw any strong conclusions (e.g., Misiak et al. 2019).

Similarly, the population of terrorists cannot be easily correlated with standard socioeconomic variables. Statistically, terrorists are socially and economically “remarkably ordinary” (Silber and Bhatt, 2007). They do not come disproportionately from backgrounds of poverty or prosperity. They are not disproportionately less educated or better educated (Krueger and Maleckova, 2003; Silber and Bhatt, 2007; Noricks, 2009). Rather, much depends on the group and situation under study (e.g., Berrebi, 2007; Vidino, 2010; Reinares, 2010; Weenink, 2015; Vidino and Hughes, 2015). Context matters, and generalizations are hard to come by. Overall, the study of the root causes of terrorism, drawing on various kinds of data across nations and time, provides little in the way of consistent data to support profiling (Noricks, 2009).

Consequently, researchers have abandoned the quest for a terrorist phenotype and turned their attention to understanding the process of radicalization by which individuals become terrorists (Taylor and Horgan, 2006; Horgan, 2008b). If on the whole, the jihadists are “remarkably ordinary,” then something must be happening to make them engage in such extra-ordinary actions. The examination of this process became the focal point of research, ushering in a more complex approach to the problem. This approach addressed the problem of specificity better, by demonstrating that the radicalization of each individual is the result of the cumulative effect or convergence of diverse variables, in different ways. As suggested, however, the process oriented approach simultaneously exacerbates the problem of specificity, by multiplying the number of variables that must be investigated to make a determination of whether, how, and why radicalization is happening in each case.

The process orientation first gave rise to a series of fairly simple models, some based on limited direct evidence (e.g., Wiktorowicz, 2005; Sageman, 2008a), and others that were more conjectural (Borum, 2003; Moghadam, 2005; Silber and Bhatt, 2007). These models

were helpful, and in the absence of any other perspectives, widely cited. Without dwelling on details, however, it became apparent that they suffered from some common deficiencies. Many were largely descriptive in nature and devoid of much in the way of empirically grounded explanatory principles (Veldhuis and Staun 2009). They designated stages through which someone radicalizes, creating the impression of a linear process by which people are channelled into violent extremism. While the models recognized that decisions along the way could take individuals in a different direction, critics pejoratively labelled the theories “conveyor-belt models” (McCauley and Moskalenko 2009, p. 240; Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko and McCauley 2009; Powell 2016).

Randy Borum suggested individuals went through four stages on the path to terrorism, involving changes in attitudes and eventually behavior. The four stages involved experiencing social economic deprivations, developing resentments about inequality, attributing blame to others, and then stereotyping and demonizing an enemy. Silber and Bhatt’s model described things in broader terms with stages identified as “pre-radicalization,” “self-identification,” “indoctrination,” and “jihadization.” The other models were somewhat more nuanced and less linear (see King and Taylor, 2011 pp. 604-609), but collectively “the lack of empirical research verifying the factors and processes within these models” (King and Taylor, 2011, p. 615; Jensen, Seate, and James 2018), and a growing awareness of the greater complexity of the process, undermined their credibility and appeal. Two closely-related factors emerged, however, as King and Taylor argue (2011, p. 609 and 615), that have continued to be relevant to analyses of radicalization: feelings of relative deprivation (but not just economic deprivation - see Glock 1964), and the management of identity crises (Vidino, 2010; Sageman, 2017; Jensen et al., 2018; Vergani et al., 2018).

Going further, Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins (2015) argue that the notion of a “process” of radicalization should be replaced by the metaphor of a “puzzle.” Referring to a “process,” they propose, always implies a “clear pattern or pathway to radicalization,” yet the empirical research reveals a complex reality that confounds modelling these pathways. They encourage scholars and intelligence analysts to “embrace the multifactor and contextual

approach that is implied by the puzzle metaphor” (2015, p. 959). Processual models need not be linear, however, at least not in the sense of implying a necessary or ordered sequence of stages or factors. Most attempts to understand radicalization now are more about tracing the complex interactions of a set of discernible factors which may impact different individuals, in different contexts, in different ways, to different degrees, and in diverse sequences, or parallel ways (Taylor and Horgan 2006; Dawson 2017a). To capture this situation, John Horgan proposed we use the notion of “pathways” (Horgan 2008b; Horgan and Taylor 2011). Pathways are more complex and heterogeneous, but there is still discernible pattern and some commonality of factors (Horgan, Shortland and Abbasciano, 2018). With more data, especially primary data, as well as more refined modelling techniques, most researchers still think we can craft more flexible and multifactorial conceptions of how radicalization happens, ones that take into account the idiosyncratic features of every individual’s pathway (Dawson 2017a).

(3) The Necessity of a Multi-factorial Approach

In seeking to understand the process of radicalization it became apparent that many factors can potentially have an impact on a person’s decision to become involved in violent extremism. Moreover, as detailed case studies of terrorists reveal, while there are commonalities in how this happens, no two individuals radicalize in exactly the same way (Horgan, 2008; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Nesser, 2010; Hafez and Mullins 2015). There are many factors, whose presence, interaction, and degree of relevance will vary, and in most cases certain contingencies play a role that can be identified, but not readily predicted. The radicalization of someone may depend, for example, on encountering an influential figure, by chance, at just the moment when the person is open (e.g., after a divorce) to making a significant change in their lives (Wiktorowicz, 2005). Radicalization is the result of a complex causal process involving multiple factors, and the pathways by which different individuals

become engaged in violent extremism are multiple as well. Yet, like other social phenomena, with sufficient information, the possibilities can be modelled (Smelser, 2007, pp. 90-119).

Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko (2008), for instance, identify twelve different “mechanism of radicalization,” operating at either the individual, group, or mass levels. The mechanisms range from personal victimization or joining an extremist group because of romantic love to groups becoming violent as result of competition with other extremist groups. The twelve mechanisms can be present to varying degrees, and in different combinations, in the radicalization of specific individuals or groups. Similarly, Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010) summaries the findings and perspectives of a wide variety of studies focused on the historical, cultural, social, political, and psychological aspects of the process of radicalization. These studies discuss the influence of broad social structural factors, such as globalization and the weakening of traditional communities, the pivotal role of group phenomenon such as social networks, interpersonal relationships, and charismatic leaders in recruiting terrorists, and the diversity of more personal motivations and triggers for radicalization that can be detected at the individual level. Hafez and Mullins (2015) summarize the results of the empirical literature on the causes and dynamics of radicalization, examining the roles played by grievances, networks, ideology, and enabling environments (such as the Internet) in transforming ordinary individuals into violent extremists. Whatever the merits of the summaries and models advanced in these studies, each highlights the need to take a complex multifactorial approach to the topic (see Taylor and Horgan, 2006; Davis and Cragin, 2009).

More recent research is only heightening this sense of the complexity. Applying an innovative analytical technique to a wide range of possible radicalizing factors for a rich dataset of 56 violent and nonviolent individuals who radicalized in the United States between 1960 and 2013, Michael Jensen, Anita Atwell Seate, and Patrick James (2018) found evidence of eight different pathways to violent extremism. In a study of the lives of 35 current and former white supremacists involved in violence (either planned or spontaneous), Susan Fahey and Pete Simi (2018) question the utility of thinking about “pathways” altogether. Using

extensive life history interviews, open-source data, and an elaborate Qualitative Comparative Analysis method, they found, for their sample, that “there is no single, or even multiple pathways or combination of risk factors which led reliably to either planned or spontaneous violence.” Consequently, they argue, “pathway is no more useful as a heuristic device than profile” (2018, p. 18).

Whether other studies will yield similar results is an open question, and it seems Fahey and Simi may be calling on an overly linear conception of what constitutes a pathway (see p. 18). Nonetheless, the research indicates how the five basic issues under consideration overlap and interact in complex ways. Fahey and Simi’s study, for example, touches on all five points, and it could be discussed equally well in any section of this article.

(4) The Heterogeneity Problem

Trying to make sense of how and why people undergo a process of radicalization leading to violence forces us to take into consideration the diversity of people who radicalize, the types of groups they join, the types of involvement they may have, and the roles they have within extremist groups. Specificity issues arise with each of these kinds of heterogeneity.

Over the last decade or so, case studies of individuals who have become terrorists reveal that many of those who join groups (e.g., al-Qaeda) or participate in movements (travel to Syria to join ISIS) share some common background factors (e.g., being young, the children of immigrants, unemployed, or perhaps from a certain ethnicity). Some, however, are quite different as well (Sageman, 2004; Bakker, 2010; Nesser, 2015; Vidino and Hughes, 2015; Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., 2018). Most glaringly, while some Western male recruits to jihadism, for example, have come from quite troubled backgrounds, with family issues, limited education, drug-abuse issues and criminality (e.g., Richard Reid or Damian Clairmont), others appear to have been model citizens, with happy family lives, university degrees, good jobs, spouses and even children (e.g., Mohammad Sidique Khan or Salman Ashrafi). Recruits from the former background fit the popular prejudices about violent

extremists. They become involved as a way of compensating for their troubled lives. But how do we account for the latter type of recruit? What are they compensating for? Any explanation we seek must apply equally to both types of recruits, as well the others who radicalize who differ in other regards.

Other forms of heterogeneity are relevant as well, such as the different kinds of terrorists groups.⁷ In this regard, there are a number of analytically significant yet overlapping distinctions to keep in mind. In the first place, it is crucial to distinguish between ethno-nationalist (e.g., Provisional Irish Republican Army, Front de libération du Québec, and perhaps the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam), social-revolutionary (e.g., Red Brigades, Red Army Faction, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia), and religious types of terrorism (e.g., Salafi-jihadist groups), and within these basic types between sub-variants such as left and right wing forms of terrorism, fundamentalist (e.g., anti-abortion actions in the United States) and new religious forms (e.g., Aum Shinrikyo), and so on.

In addition, as John Horgan (2005, p. 30) points out, “[t]errorist groups vary greatly not just in terms of their motivations, but also in size, capacity, resources, as well as their national composition and cultural background.” Likewise, he notes, they vary in their organizational structure, and hence their decision-making, tactics, targeting, weapons use, and, of course, styles of recruitment.

Other less obvious forms of heterogeneity are the differences between foreign (or imported) and homegrown forms of terrorism, those occurring in and out of zones of conflict, and those rooted in larger social and political movements and semi-autonomous cliques. These differences matter. Much of the terrorist activity in zones of conflict, for example, especially suicide bombings, may be linked to personal experiences of trauma (Post et al., 2003; Merai et al., 2010a), and perhaps even to the effects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (Speckhard and Ahkmedova, 2006). This is patently not the case for the vast majority of homegrown terrorists. Similarly, the conditions surrounding the emergence of homegrown

⁷ Some of this discussion of types of terrorist groups is from Dawson 2014.

jihadi terrorism differ markedly from that of left-wing radicals in the 1970s and 80s, where terrorist groups emerged gradually from escalating confrontations between protest movements and authorities (Wasmund, 1986; Sprinzak 1990; Braungart and Braungart, 1992; Della Porta, 1995). The “bunch of guys,” as Sageman (2008b) calls most homegrown jihadist terrorist groups, is not radicalized through a gradual socialization to ever more violent tactics born of the frustrations experienced by members of a larger movement of social protest. Most jihadists seem to revert to violence without any consideration of, or exposure to, more conventional forms of social action and political protest. In addition, they are not part of a centralized organization, either in the straightforward sense that members of the Irish Republican Army or the Palestinian Liberation Organization are, or more amorphously, as members of the Red Brigades were in the 1970s or members of al Qaeda are today. Rather they are semi-autonomous grass-roots groups responding to either a broader social movement or set of ideas (e.g., Sageman, 2008b; Neumann, 2009; Braniff and Moghadam, 2011).

Failure to heed these distinctions can result in serious attribution errors when motivational inferences from one situation or type of terrorism are used to explain another. How much insight, for example, do we really gain into the motivation and radicalization of Zakaria Amara, one of the ring-leaders of the Toronto 18 terrorist plot, from the study of a Hamas suicide bomber in Gaza or the West Bank (e.g., Brym and Araj, 2006)? Both are Muslim, and both embraced violence, but the obvious contrast in their circumstances is as instructive as any similarities between them.

As indicated, however, there are even further forms of heterogeneity. In this context they need only be indicated, without elaborating on the distinctions, their merits and consequences. Petter Nesser (2010), for example, developed an intriguing typology of four kinds of members of typical jihadist cells in Europe. Based on the careful study of many such groups, he differentiates between entrepreneurs, protégés, misfits, and drifters. The entrepreneurs are the founders and leaders of cells, and they play a key role in their operation. “The protégés are similar to the entrepreneurs, but junior and inferior to them. They are typically second in command of cells.” Both tend to “embrace jihadism gradually through

intellectual processes, activism, idealism and a call for social and political justice” (2010, p. 93). The misfits are people with “troubled backgrounds as well as criminal records,” and they “typically join ... to cope with personal problems or out of loyalty to their friends, or some combination of the two” (2010, p. 94). Drifters, Nesser admits, is a less well-defined category that applies to much of the rest of the membership. They may look much like the others, but “differ by having less specific reasons for teaming up with the jihadis in the first place. They tend to be people who are ‘going with the flow’ rather unconsciously. The dominant motivations for joining appear to relate to social networks and commitments” (2010, p. 94). To the extent this, or any other characterization of the different types of people drawn to terrorism, holds true,⁸ it exacerbates the specificity problem. It reminds us, that is, that different people may become engaged in terrorism for different reasons, and in different ways. Any theory of radicalization must, again, apply to all of the different types and ways of becoming involved with jihadism, or at least systematically account for the differences.

In many respects, however, Nesser’s typology bifurcates into just two categories, namely that of leaders and followers. The significance of this difference has long been recognized in the study of social and religious movements (e.g., Lulich, 1988; Weinberg and Eubank, 1989; Reader, 2000; Morris and Staggenborg, 2004). We must guard against assuming that the experience of the leadership and the rank-and-file are the same. This is rarely the case, since the leaders and those close to them have more knowledge of the situation and power over it. This difference affects the level and type of their commitment, and their motivations for engaging in violence. This can work in a number of ways. Leaders may be more likely to condone violence because they are more ideologically convinced of its necessity, or they more directly benefit from it. The leaders, Nesser’s “entrepreneurs,” are likely to be more fanatical and invested (Schuurman and Taylor, 2018). Of course, in some

⁸ For example, Venhaus (2010) differentiates four types of “seekers” drawn to al-Qaeda: revenge seekers, status seekers, identity seekers, and thrill seekers. Meleagrou-Hitchens et al. (2018), divide American foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq into three categories, pioneers, networked travelers, and loners. The distinctions reflect differences in the “underlying factors behind their travel, how they made their journey, and what role they took in jihadists groups” (2018: 1).

circumstances this investment in their own power and its benefits (social and material) may work to moderate violence in a group or situation. Plus, as Jessica Stern discovered, sometimes cynicism make take hold of the leadership, and dedication to the rectification of grievances may be displaced by the leaders' "greed – for money, political power, or attention" (2003, p. 282). In the case of the charismatic leaders of groups who have become violent, though, analyses suggest the contrary. This form of authority is quite prevalent in terrorist groups (Dawson, 2010; Hofmann and Dawson, 2015), and its structural liabilities tend to incentivize the leaders to take actions that heightened the likelihood of violence, to protect and bolster their charismatic authority (Dawson, 2002; Dawson, 2010). On the other hand, followers may be more prone to actually perpetrating violent acts than leaders, to prove their loyalty and worth to the leadership and gain status within the group. Many permutations are possible, and in every case the inner circle of the leadership is likely to grasp things differently from the rest of the group, and this poses a specificity challenge.

Finally, this situation points to yet another pertinent form of heterogeneity, the different ways individuals may be active in terrorist groups. Not everyone is, or ever intends to be, directly engaged in violence. Members may be supporting the group or cause through financial contributions or by laundering money. They may be helping with logistics and other kinds of technical support, or assisting with recruitment. The levels and kinds of commitment for each role may differ, and hence the reasons for joining and participating may differ as well (Taylor and Horgan, 2006). This in turn means the levels of risk such individuals pose to society – at least in terms of imminent and overt violence – will likely be variable.

In recent work, John Horgan, Neil Shortland and Suzette Abbasciano (2018) pursue "the premise that there may be significant variations between those who engage in terrorism in different sorts of ways" (2018, p. 85). They innovatively apply a multi-dimensional scaling method, drawn from investigative psychology, to a sample of 183 jihadists convicted of terrorist related offences in the United States. Their findings correlate the co-occurrence of 45 behavioral variables with three dominant thematic types of terrorists: actors, supporters, and facilitators. Plus they document the presence of a fourth "hybrid" type - individuals engaged

in behaviors that mix or crossover the dominant thematic types. The details of the analysis are too complex to summarize here, and, as the authors acknowledge, there are a number of significant methodological limitations. All the same, the study is very instructive, since it indicates the ways in which more inductive and systematic approaches can be used to empirically identify and analyze forms of intra-group heterogeneity. In terms of understanding radicalization, Horgan et al. (2018) suggest that a better description of these differences could help us to determine “the degrees to which different types of behavior are reflective of underlying (and consistent) differences in the psychological incentives” for individuals to become involved in terrorism (2018, p. 98).

In each of these diverse ways the heterogeneity of terrorist groups and their members poses problems for the specificity of explanations of why people get involved.

(5) The Data Problem

Lastly, the specificity problem is compounded by the lack of data available on processes of radicalization, especially micro-level primary data, such as interviews with terrorists (e.g., Brannan, Esler and Strindberg, 2001; Horgan, 2005, 2008; Smelser, 2007, pp. 90-91; Helmus, 2009, p. 73; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010). In 2001 Andrew Silke reported that only ten percent of the research in terrorism studies utilized interviews, and in 2008 he documented that only one percent of research reports on terrorism are based on systematic interviews with terrorists (2008: 101). Since then things have improved. Reviewing the research literature from 2007 to 2016, Bart Schuurman (2018) discovered that almost sixteen percent of studies employed interviews. The overall number of studies involving interviews with terrorists, however, remains relatively small and uncertain (e.g., Horgan, 2009; Merari et al., 2010a; Orsini, 2013; Weggemans et al., 2014; Barrelle, 2015; Hwang, 2017; Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017,

Fahey and Simi 2018).⁹ Good work is being done, but most studies continue to be based on sets of cases compiled from the limited and sometimes flawed data available from open sources, such as news stories, court documents, and biographies and autobiographies (e.g., Bakker, 2010; Vidino, 2011; Andre and Harris-Hogan, 2013; Mullins, 2013; Nesser, 2015; Coolsaet, 2016), and their results may be at least partially an artefact of that fact.

Some important advances are being made through the development of larger datasets and samples, and statistical analyses of more systematically coded data. This work is leading to a much fuller and accurate understanding of the backgrounds and behaviors of terrorists (e.g., Merari, 2010b; Gill, Horgan, and Deckert, 2014; Corner and Gill, 2015; Vidino and Hughes, 2015; Duyvesteyn and Peeters, 2015; Weenink 2015; Klausen et al., 2016; Jensen and LaFree, 2016; Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2018; Pokalova, 2018).

Other studies, based on interviews with former extremists and those who have known terrorists and foreign fighters (i.e., family members and friends), are enhancing our grasp of the process of radicalization process as well (e.g., Speckhard and Ahkmedova, 2006; Amarasingam and Dawson, 2017; Van San, 2018; Sieckelinck and de Winter, nd).

The study of homegrown jihadist radicalization in the West continues, however, to suffer from serious data deficiencies. Schuurman documents that there has been only a one percent increase in the number of studies based on databases between the early 2000s and 2016 (2018, p. 10), and there are only a handful of studies based on a small number of interviews with jihadists (e.g., Ilardi, 2013; Weggemans et al., 2014; Bakker and Grol, 2015; Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017; el-Said and Barrett, 2017). Given the legal, ethical, and security challenges involved in accessing terrorists, whether current, former, arrested, or imprisoned, the dearth of data is not surprising. Even when interviews can be conducted, there are serious issues of trust, for both the terrorists and researchers, and questions about the credibility of the data obtained (see e.g., Horgan, 2005, pp. 88-89, 2008; Speckard, 2009;

⁹ Schuurman (2018) does not breakdown his data on studies using interviews to further determine what percentage were based on interviews with terrorists.

Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, pp. 811-812; Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017, pp. 12-15; Khalil, 2017).

In the absence of primary data, and what is more an appreciation of the need to prioritize such data, the field of terrorism studies will continue to fall prey, as Jeffery Bale laments (2013, pp. 12-13 and 2018, pp. 6-8), to the problem of “mirror imaging.” Too often, in the absence of other data, analysts will “project their own ways of thinking, their own values, their own frames of reference, and their own fantasies onto [the terrorists], including those emanating from very different cultures with very different histories and values, instead of trying to view the world from the [terrorists] own perspectives and points of view” (Bale, 2018, p. 6). This parochialism can have very dangerous consequences for work designed to inform counter-terrorism efforts, and especially when we are dealing with individuals who repeatedly profess the centrality of an “extremist ideology” (i.e., a set of beliefs that deviate significantly from our own social and political norms) in motivating their actions. As I have argued elsewhere (Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017, pp. 12-15; Dawson, 2018, pp. 111-113), it is irrelevant whether the beliefs and ideas espoused by jihadists, such as the imminent restoration of the Caliphate, seem fantastical to outside observers. To evoke two old sociological maxims, if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences (Thomas and Thomas, 1928, pp. 571-572), and consequently there is a methodological obligation to attempt to grasp their definition of the situation, if we wish to acquire an accurate understanding of what is happening and why (Blumer, 1969; Ball, 1972).

Of course, as noted, the use of such data is always plagued by questions about its veracity. How can we be confident that the views espoused by specific jihadists, for example, are sincere, actually significant for them, and representative of the motivations of others? In the face of some uncertainty we are forced to rely on our professional judgement, which is hopefully grounded in systematic reasoning based on the evidence available.

Concluding Reflections

In sum, then, to close the gaps in our knowledge of how and why young men and women become involved in violent extremism we need to focus on a process of radicalization, using a multifactorial approach. We need to be sensitive to the complex interaction of variables at the societal, group, and individual levels, recognizing that these variables interact in diverse ways, and to variable degrees, in the radicalization of different individuals. To this end we must employ whatever data is at our disposal, but prioritize the acquisition of good primary data from the terrorists themselves, and those who have known them best. We need to be careful, however, in how we interpret this information, and we need to test the adequacy of our analyses repeatedly for the specificity of the findings and conclusions. This means keeping the many different forms of heterogeneity in mind. In the end, it is unlikely that we will ever acquire a specific enough grasp of the process of radicalization to differentiate those who commit acts of extremist violence from others completely. Seeking to do so, however, can serve a useful heuristic purpose. Resolving the specificity problem can be a regulatory ideal helping us to guard against adopting explanations that may actually exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, the gaps in our knowledge (Dawson, 2017a; 2018).

It also will push us to develop the kinds of sophisticated models of radicalization required to inform more precise, flexible, and efficient programs of prevention (Davis and Cragin, 2009; Dawson, 2017a; Jensen et al. 2018). To make progress on this front, however, we need to tackle, more incisively, two interrelated issues highlighted by this analysis: (1) developing a more refined and balanced conception of the relationship of attitudes and behavior, or talk and action, and (2) developing a more methodologically sophisticated approach to the interpretation of the accounts we collect about radicalization.

Pointing to the apparent disjuncture between radical talk and violent action, many prominent terrorism scholars have sought to minimize the significance accorded to beliefs, and hence ideology or religion, in the process of radicalization (Coolsaet, 2011, pp. 261-262; McCauley and Moskalenko 2011, pp. 219-221; Schuurman and Horgan 2016; Sageman 2017,

pp. 111-161). This shift away from what may have been an overly naïve, under-theorized, and strong reliance on ideology as an indicator of violent extremism in the post-9/11 era has had an unanticipated and unhelpful side-effect. It has exacerbated the problems posed by the neglect of primary data. In part, this is because the same scholars have expressed scepticism about the veracity of the motivational claims made by terrorists themselves, because they tend to be heavily ideological. Each issue reinforces the other and they are intermingled in much of the literature.

The argument is that motivational claims made by terrorists merely reflect the influence of ideological indoctrination, and that this indoctrination occurs largely after they have already been radicalized by social processes, such as the influence of their peers and pre-existing social networks and the quest for social identity (e.g., Sageman, 2017; McCauley and Moskaleiko 2017). There is little doubt that these social processes play an instrumental role in the process of radicalization, but they alone cannot account for the violence perpetrated later. They lack the specificity to explain violent extremism as much as mere exposure to an ideology does. It is the conjunction and co-evolution of the social processes and the exposure to the ideology that is causal (Reinares et al., 2017). Seeing the world through the lens of a powerful ideological narrative frames reality in alternative and compelling ways that guide the turn from radical talk to action. This is what talking to jihadists has taught me, and reflects what most jihadists assert repeatedly in their public pronouncements. To discern the balance of these factors more accurately, however, we need to collect a great deal more data from the terrorists about their lives and reasoning.

To this end, terrorism scholars need to realize that the disjuncture between attitudes and behavior that undergirds their dismissal of the etiological significance of radical talk is neither as clear-cut nor substantial as they seem to think (e.g., McCauley and Moskaleiko 2011, p. 219-220; McCauley and Moskaleiko, 2017, p. 211). Many social psychologists, Icek Ajzen and Martin Fishbein (2005) note, have argued that attitudes have little to do with actual behavior. Yet, citing an apropos example, these authors state: “Clearly, the dramatic events of September 11 had a profound impact on people’s beliefs and attitudes, and the enhanced pride

in country, increased solidarity with fellow citizens, and heightened sense of purpose found expression in a variety of behavioral domains” (2005, p. 173). Certain kinds of attitudes, we now know, do not align well with certain kinds of behaviors. Meta-analyses of the relationship reveal, however, that under discernable conditions “attitudes significantly and substantially predict future behavior” (Krauss, 1995, p. 58; Glassman and Albarracin, 2006). Much depends on how the attitudes were formed, the specificity of the object of the attitude, how readily and often the attitude is recalled and enacted, and many other complex, but discernible, factors. Thus we need to investigate how closely the circumstances surrounding an individual’s radicalization match the conditions under which people act in accordance with their attitudes? This is what we need to understand better to make headway on the specificity problem.

This means we must acquire more data about and from terrorists, and learn to be more sophisticated in the way we interpret that data, and hence confident in the insights gleaned. More systematic attention should be given to the substantial research literature on collecting, interpreting, and explaining the accounts people offer to justify and make sense of their actions, especially actions occurring under great stress, or involving significant change, or deviation from dominant norms (e.g., Scott and Lyman, 1968; Gilbert and Abel, 1983; Antaki, 1988; McClure 1991; Dawson, 1995; Orbuch, 1997). If we limit ourselves to a realist epistemological perspective, and a pragmatic focus, there is much to be learned about the ways in which accounts are subject to distortion, and we might better sort the wheat from the chaff when talking to terrorists. If we adopt a more social constructionist stance, as many analysts of accounts do, then the focus shifts to better discerning the nature of the accounts terrorists use, like the rest of us, to fashion a meaningful life. Questions about the veracity of the accounts are then fairly irrelevant, but understanding the construction and consequences of the accounts is significant for anticipating behavior.

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ISSN: 2363-9849

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