

Perceptions of Precursors to Radicalisation: Reflections on a Cross-Cultural Study

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Introduction

My name is Sabrina Hussain, Researcher (University of Warwick)

Thank you to ANS and YEIP for the invitation to contribute to the Conference.

I will discuss this morning:

- a) Research project conducted over the last year with colleague (Prof. Spurgeon; University of Warwick)
- b) I will focus on precursors to radicalisation; our methods and findings
- c) Then offer some interpretive comments about the approach and future options for the area of research.

Background (1)

High profile terror attacks in Europe – for eg. Nice, Brussels, London and Manchester attacks.

Despite (Astier, 2017) notes there were more attacks in Europe prior to 2000, with an average death rate of 150 – now averaging less than that. (maybe now due to media coverage, use of social media used in many platforms).

Terrorist acts have become less frequent but deadlier.

Particular focus on Islamic terrorists and how individuals committing these acts have become radicalised to do so.

Background (2)

Several studies have identified factors that may be associated with radicalisation.

Survey studies such as:

- Schills & Pauwels (2016); Lyons-Padilla et. al (2015); Grossman & Tahiri (2015) reported perceived injustice, lack of social integration and a sense of loss of significance as disposing factors.

Qualitative studies:

- Ahmed (2016); Lynch (2013) identify a view that young Muslims feel parents have sacrificed their Islamic values in order to integrate.

* All these studies used a population from one country, but did not compare results from samples taken from different countries. Our research specifically compares perceptions from different country samples.

Background (3)

Models of Radicalisation

Attempts have been made to develop models that describe the process of radicalisation (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014); Two-Pyramid model (Moghaddam, 2005) Staircase model.

These seem plausible, but are essentially descriptive and fail to suggest the dynamic element that explains why a few move to terrorist acts while the rest, whilst espousing support, do not.

Young et. al (2013) suggest terms such as extremism, radicalisation, fundamentalism and terrorism are used without precision and interchangeably.

Pruyt & Kwakkel (2014) argue that there is no agreed definition of radicalisation.

MOGHADDAM STAIRCASE

THE TERRORIST ACT
AND SIDESTEPPING
INHIBITORY MECHANISMS

5th FLOOR

Solidification of Categorical Thinking
and the Perceived Legitimacy
of the Terrorist Organization

4th FLOOR

Moral
Engagement

3rd FLOOR

Displacement
of Agression

2nd FLOOR

Perceived
Options to Fight Unfair
Treatment

1st FLOOR

Psychological
Interpretation of
Material Conditions

GROUND FLOOR

Research

Qualitative, semi-structured interview (approx. 1 hour) used with samples from the UK and USA (N=15 in each, male and female).

Transcripts then subject to Thematic Analysis (following model of Braun & Clark, 2006).

24 sub-themes identified, and 7 over-arching themes.

Analysis cross checked by experienced independent social science researcher.

Results

7 Over arching themes:

1. Confusion about Meaning of Extremism Related Terms
2. Indicators of Radicalisation
3. Perceived Precursors of Radicalisation
4. Personality Type
5. Internet/Social Media
6. Local Community
7. Countering Radicalisation

Exemplar themes (1)

a) **Confusion about Meaning of Terminology**

“Radicalisation? Well with somebody that is radical it is because that is also that they just take one position”.

“Sorry didn’t understand what fundamentalism means” – “Isn’t extremism and radicalisation mean the same thing”.

“Extremism when you take certain things from the book”.

Exemplar themes (2)

b) Indicators of Radicalisation (UK only)

“Isolate themselves from family, break relationships with old friends and make new ones, and change the way they start dressing”.

“Not really confident on their own, nor sociable”.

Discussion

Confusion of terminology confirmed

Some consensus across on samples about possible precursors

A 'personality type' also suggested

But both personality and precursors (?Stereotypes) describe many individuals – but few become terrorists.

UK/USA samples differ on two themes:

- Indicators of radicalisation (strong in UK but not found in USA)
- Local Community (again emphasis in UK on local community and local leaders doing none; not found in USA).

Implications of study

Could the consensus be a reflection of media coverage rather than real knowledge of radicalisation?

Many 'terrorists' have often been involved in other minor crime. Scrutiny of the process of inevitable escalation may be key.

More all Muslim and female samples may be useful.

Local MP with a large muslim majority in is constituency has relayed more work being done by his local community in reporting issues of radicalisation.

Psychological studies to track the formation of views is important, with more valid and reliable screening tools.

It may be as Victoroff (2005) writes that such a large range of psychological, social and structural factors may be involved but none can be the key predictors. Rather than identifying lists of factors it may be more productive to assess the degree of relative risk associated with certain types of predictors.

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