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# What Do We Know about Radicalization? A Commentary on Key Issues, Findings and a Framework for Future Research for the Scientific and Applied Community

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# What Do We Know about Radicalization? A Commentary on Key Issues, Findings and a Framework for Future Research for the Scientific and Applied Community

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This IJCV focus section presents seven articles that resulted from a project involving a mix of researchers and practitioners working jointly on different aspects of radicalization. The current commentary provides an overview of these, examining how the findings inform our wider understanding, support previous findings and provide a framework for future research. It also synthesizes the issues raised and explores where this takes the scientific and applied community. Whilst based primarily on literature and lessons learned from Germany, many of the findings and recommendations are applicable to the wider international context. This collection of articles on the subject of radicalization therefore provides the reader with a broad and up-to-date understanding of key concepts, themes and issues, and an in-depth understanding of specific topics, ongoing challenges and know-ledge gaps. It also provides a solid basis to inform evidence-based practice and highlights practitioner requirements and gaps in understanding that need to be addressed. The knowledge presented here can therefore inform Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism efforts, which need to be practical, feasible, affordable and evidence-based.

Keywords: Radicalization; extremism; terrorism; violent; non-violent; counter-terrorism; prevent

This focus section provides the reader with an up-todate synthesis of literature on radicalization, which can inform both scholars and practitioners working in this area. There is a massive literature on this and related topics such as extremism and terrorism, and often an assumption that these are inextricably intertwined. However, much of the literature is based on anecdote, personal opinion or flawed reasoning. Scholars have sought to provide an evidence-based understanding of: (a) when there are or are not links between radicalization, extremism and terrorism; (b) distinctions between radical thought, extremist beliefs and violent action; and (c) the factors underlying these. This is required to ensure that Preventing/ Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) responses are appropriate, proportionate and likely to be effective, rather than counter-productive.

In order to address the threat posed by some extremist individuals, we need to understand how, when and why radicalization plays a role (and how, when and why it does not), the factors that may influence (facilitate and hinder) extremist-related violence, and how and when to best intervene. This collection outlines key findings and considerations, and provides a basis for those responsible for P/CVE to ensure that efforts are not only practical, feasible and affordable, but also evidence-based. It also identifies gaps in our current understanding to provide direction for future research in this area, and approaches that might be appropriate to take. Articles explore how radicalization is defined and conceptualized, narratives that underlie radical thought and the legitimization of violent action, other (psychological, social, political) factors that can influence extremism (online and offline), how

to prevent and counter radicalization and extremism and how to evaluate P/CVE efforts.

The collection opens with an article by Abay Gaspar et al. (2020), which sets the scene by exploring definitional and conceptual issues regarding the term "radicalization". This is an ongoing, longstanding and endemic problem within the literature that affects how and when research can be applied to realworld P/CVE responses. The article provides a description of how this has been defined historically and shifted within more contemporary debates to include, and often imply, violence, how it has evolved to be associated with extremism and terrorism, and how this has influenced political and social responses to radicalization. The authors propose a new, broader understanding that makes a clear distinction between radical beliefs, which are typically non-violent, through to extremistrelated violent action. They propose that radicalization should be understood as being on a spectrum: from radicalization without violence, to radicalization into violence, and radicalization within violence. Implications regarding public and media discourses are explored, plus interventions and other responses by those responsible for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE).

The second article by Pisoiu and colleagues (2020) comprises an overview of how the German literature contributes to our understanding of how, when and why individuals come to join extremist groups, radicalize and/or commit acts of terrorism. Individual factors underlying radicalization and extremism are examined, along with theories that can inform our understanding of this topic. These include personality, cognitions, emotion and affect, socio-psychological explanations that take account of interactions between the individual and their environment, social identity and how people develop and maintain beliefs, attitudes, values, norms, and roles within their social groups. This article provides a basis for the development of effective P/CVE interventions that are evidence-based and focus on those factors that can drive or protect against radicalization and violent extremism.

The next article by Meiering and colleagues (2020) focuses on the role of narratives in relation to radicalization, identifying key features within ideologies that are similar across different radicalized groups. The authors propose that the identification of shared core ideological elements provides a basis for investigating group radicalization and understanding the legitimization and use of violence. The process of co-radicalization involves different (sometimes opposing) groups mutually contributing to each other's radicalization, as the ideology and actions of one group influence those of another group (for example, an Islamist extremist ideology can fuel far right views, and vice versa). The authors explore the bridging function narratives may fulfill between ideologically divergent groups and explore implications for preventative efforts. This article draws from and offers a connect for social psychologists with expertise in intergroup conflict and in-group/out-group dynamics. Making this link is important as it can inform and engender collaborations between experts with a wider set of skills and knowledge, in order to, for example, help us to understand interpersonal interactions and how these may fuel or protect against radicalization.

Building on the recognition that radicalization can occur at different levels, the fourth article in this collection by Herschinger et al. (2020) examines the concepts of "collective" and "mass" radicalization. The authors identify factors and dynamics that underlie and enable this, for example, how socio-political changes can reduce social cohesion and how this and other variables (such as radicalized groups, the socio-political environment and context) can affect societies. Concepts such as polarization and co-radicalization are explored and recommendations for further research are set out.

The subject of de-radicalization and specific challenges for theory and practice in Germany are the focus of the fifth article by Baaken and colleagues (2020). A literature review and interviews with experts identify ideology, identity and risk as three recurring topics of current debates in this area. The authors discuss distinctions between de-radicalization, disengagement and demobilization, and provide an overview of de-radicalization in practice in Germany and the challenges associated with this. For example, different definitions used by practitioners, academics, (security) authorities and within politics, a lack of agreement regarding what we mean by radicalization in practical terms, and, as such, what de-radicalization and other P/CVE efforts are trying and expecting to achieve.

The sixth article by Winter and colleagues (2020) differs from previous articles in that it provides a review of the literature that focuses on online extremism, exploring trends in research on internet activism, radicalization, and strategies for countering these. The authors define key concepts and explore how and why the internet is used to support violent extremism by individuals and by organizations, and ways in which this is or may be countered online, via both reactive and proactive measures. Finally, the seventh article by Nehlsen and colleagues (2020) explores a key question relevant to all those interested in P/CVE - how can we measure the effectiveness of de-radicalization and other P/CVE efforts? Here, the authors explore the evaluation of P/CVE in Germany, and set out practical solutions and insights for researchers, policy-makers and practitioners, regarding how evaluations can be commissioned, planned, implemented and utilized.

### 1 Current Understanding and Insights from This Issue

Three key messages regarding radicalization are worth highlighting here. First, not all individuals who are radical are violent extremists, and not all violent extremists are radical: Radicalization is only one potential route to violence, and very few of those radicalized individuals who support the use of violence to achieve extremist goals will actually be prepared to conduct acts of violence themselves. Second, there is no single profile of a violent extremist. Many factors have been found to underlie violent extremism, one of these being radicalization; however, individuals vary dramatically in terms of the factors that influence their attitudes and behaviors. For example, whilst some people are driven by radical ideas and beliefs, religion and ideology, many more are attracted by factors such as money, status and a sense of belonging (the physical, social and psychological rewards that come from being part of an extremist group). Protective factors (such as strong familial bonds and other support networks) are also important, as these can explain why two individuals with similar backgrounds and characteristics may differ dramatically in their attitudes and behaviors. Third, whilst radicalization can be the result of social interaction, and has been studied extensively in terms of group relations and processes, we know that some violent extremists act alone, and this tactic has become increasingly popular for both Islamist and far right extremists.

Whilst the three messages outlined above are evidence-based and generally agreed within academia and practice, various fundamental challenges and gaps in our understanding remain. For example, one challenge facing both researchers and practitioners is a lack of agreed definitions regarding terms such as radicalization and violent extremism, and how this affects P/CVE responses. Terminology relating to "terrorism", "radicalization" and "extremism" is used widely; however, the absence of consistent definitions creates a substantial problem. In empirical research, these are necessary in order to clarify exactly which concepts are being examined, and to determine the scope of the study. The definition of, for example, an "extremist" or a "terrorist" will ultimately determine which cases are included in the dataset to be analyzed. Therefore, when definitions differ, it may be problematic to compare findings from different research studies, because fundamental aspects of each study are dependent on the definitions used. This problem has been highlighted previously, when it was recommended that future studies consider adopting definitions that have been developed and agreed with others, to facilitate comparisons between studies and their findings (Knight and Keatley 2019). Moreover, as Baaken et al. clearly state (2020, 1, this issue): "It turns out that central actors from practice, academia, (security) authorities and politics not only use different definitions, but there is also little agreement on what deradicalization (practically) means." Further exploration of the problem and potential solutions are presented here by Baaken et al. to expand our thinking on this subject.

Another related problem is that some working in P/ CVE (including, for example, scholars, policy-makers and intervention providers) conflate radicalization with violent extremism, assuming that these will usually occur together. However, recent research has shown that this is not the case (Knight, Woodward, and Lancaster 2017; Perliger, Koehler-Derrick, and Pedahzur 2016; Zekulen 2015). The pathway to radicalization is often inferred as underlying the journey to terrorism; however to be radical is to reject the status quo - it does not necessarily equate to violence (Bartlett and Miller 2012; Borum 2011; McCauley 2013). Authors writing for this focus section explore necessary distinctions between radical thought and violent action. For example, Abay Gaspar et al. (2020) propose that radicalization and violent action are on a spectrum and that interventions and responses should be tailored accordingly, whilst Winter et al. (2020) explore online radicalization and extremist-related actions. The latter is a fairly new area of study and acknowledges the important role that the internet plays in enabling terrorism, whilst also recognizing that what people say online is not necessarily predictive of their behavior offline.

The second, third and fourth articles (Pisoiu et al. 2020, Meiering et al. 2020, Herschinger et al. 2020) inform our understanding of factors that underlie radicalization at micro and meso levels, and explore when, how and why interactions, the environment and other social variables can play a key role. Contextual factors that are relevant to terrorism will relate to both immediate (capability, resources, group membership and support) and wider (political, historical) circumstances. Authors bring together an overview of the vast literature available on this topic, and highlight implications for practitioners and gaps in knowledge that require further investigation. For example, Pisoiu et al. (2020) identify theories that examine interactions between individuals and their social environment, plus long-term socialization processes, and Meiering et al. (2020) describe the process of co-radicalization as an outcome of interactions between different radical groups.

Finally, a longstanding and ongoing challenge for researchers and those responsible for P/CVE relates to measuring and evaluating the effects of interventions. Each time a terrorist attack is conducted successfully, governments, security services and law enforcement are criticized for failing to prevent this. However, authorities are constantly struggling with resources and will have large numbers of terrorist plots under active surveillance at any one time. This poses a challenge for P/CVE, in terms of searching for the proverbial

"needle in a haystack": This may involve distinguishing between high and low risk individuals, predicting details of a planned attack in terms of location and plot, and knowing when to intervene in suspected plots and how to respond in terms of both policy and practice. Regarding the latter, whilst a range of P/CVE options have been developed, measuring and evaluating these presents a number of practical, scientific and financial challenges. For example, firstly, if an individual takes part in a P/CVE intervention and they do not go on to conduct an attack, can we be sure this is because the intervention has worked, or might it be for other reasons? Secondly, how do we know which elements of the intervention had an impact? Thirdly, how do we know if the individual is simply biding their time and planning to conduct an attack later, which might be after the evaluation of the intervention is complete? Fourthly, is simply measuring "not conducting an attack" the only and most representative measure of effect that we need, or do we require other ways to conduct evaluations? The multiple pathways to terrorist/extremist acts means that an intervention may stop one pathway, while others take its place. Finally, sufficient resources (such as manpower and funding) need to be made available to allow for long-term evaluation of interventions. In the final article in this focus section, Nehlsen et al. (2020) look at real-world challenges for evidence-based approaches and propose various pragmatic solutions to these to support the effective use of evaluations.

### 2 Remaining Gaps in Knowledge and Recommendations for Future Research

As discussed above, the role of external factors must be considered in relation to radicalization, which is often a social process. However, the process of radicalization for lone actors is neglected here and is one area where further research is needed. It is recognized that the concept of "loneness" is disputable and there are difficulties in categorizing any individual as "lone" (Ellis et al. 2016; Schuurman et al. 2019). This is because, for example, the existence of the Internet makes it near impossible for extremist individuals to self-radicalize and operate without any external influence. However, individuals do now operate outside of more traditional "command and control" structures, and therefore we need to better understand how, when and why they (a) become radicalized, and (b) move to conduct acts of extremist-related violence, and how this is similar and different for lone actors compared to those operating as part of an extremist group.

Related to this, we also need to better understand the role of mental health in relation to radicalization. This is an emerging area within the literature, in particular regarding lone actor extremists. In general, past research has shown that mental illness is no higher within terrorist populations than it is within the normal, general population (Gill and Corner 2017). However, more recently, as a result of an increase in empirical research being conducted in this area, mental health has been shown to be more prevalent in extremists who operate alone (Corner, Gill, and Mason 2016). Whilst mental health issues might cause people to be vulnerable to radicalization, which in turn might lead to violent extremism; conversely, involvement in extremist groups and action may actually lead to mental illness (for example through the breakdown of psychological resilience). Furthermore, it might be that those inspired by different ideologies may be more or less likely to also experience mental health issues. Schuurman (2019) highlighted an over-focus of research on jihadist terrorism, and a dearth of empirical research looking at factors underlying extremism that is not Islamist inspired. Others also stress a gap in knowledge regarding, for example, how far right extremism is similar and different to Islamist extremism (Knight and Keatley 2019).

More research is needed to help identify between violent and non-violent extremism. For example, identifying the risks posed by those who are non-violent but active supporters of extremism, such as ideologues, fundraisers and "keyboard warriors". These present a real challenge for those responsible for P/CVE, especially law enforcement and security services who need to distinguish between individuals most likely to conduct extremist-related violent acts and those who simply espouse extremist ideas online. This challenge can be amplified when we have a number of individuals who are non-violent, but are acting in ways commensurate with those who carry on to become violent – which results in a lot of "noise" when

examining these cases. What is needed, therefore, are better methods and strategies to define and distinguish those who are most likely to conduct acts of extremist-related action and those who are not. Temporal methods is one option that might allow us to do this. Moreover, little is known regarding who, why and when certain individuals with extremist views choose not to support violent action. In particular, we need to better understand those who are against the use of violence per se, and those who simply lack the capability and/or opportunity to conduct acts of violence. Knight and Keatley (2019) describe how the COM-B model (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation -Behavior) (Michie et al. 2014) can be applied to understand violent extremism, which provides an avenue for future research to investigate.

#### 3 Challenges for Future Research

Clearly future research in this area has many areas to focus on, and methodological approaches must be rigorous and scientific. Empirical research is needed but can be difficult, due to lack of data and other data-related problems. Baaken et al. (2020, 13, this issue) state that "... in order to develop its full potential, consistent and collaborative exchanges between all involved actors must be improved", and Nehlsen et al. (2020) also stress the need for the sharing of information between practitioners and researchers. A lack of data sharing between governments and others who have access to relevant information, and scholars who have the skills to analyze and make sense of this, has been flagged previously (Sageman 2014; Knight and Keatley 2019). However, scholars have recently started to develop (and sometimes share) large datasets that allow empirical research to take place (for example LaFree 2018). Analysis has focused mostly on factors underlying radicalization and violent extremism, but most recently, others have started to explore a pathways approach to examine this topic, by comparing sequences of events prior to extremist-related behaviors (see Corner, Bouhana, and Gill 2019; Jensen, Seate, and James 2018; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008). Since it is clear that there is not one "type" or "profile" of violent extremist, a potentially more effective approach to understanding terrorism is to examine different temporal pathways. Keatley (2018) and

Keatley and colleagues (2018) have applied this approach to understanding criminal behavior. They state that mapping individual risk factors is important to understand and prevent crime; but it is also important to examine the temporal order they occur in. We can learn much from other areas such as this, for example to understand deviant behavior and to inform approaches for prevention and rehabilitation of offenders. Interdisciplinary work, as exemplified by the various articles in this issue, may also provide innovative insights into old and new problems. More research on how to design and implement effective evidencebased approaches is also needed; these may benefit from interdisciplinary methods for example.

Sharing knowledge and practice between countries is also required. This collection seeks to provide a state of the art understanding of radicalization and extremism, in particular (but not exclusively) from a German perspective. However, currently we lack understanding of how generalizable findings from research in one country are to similar problems in another country. Meiering et al. (2020, in this issue) explore environmental and contextual factors that are specific (if not necessarily unique) to Germany and demonstrate how this can influence and sometimes limit the generalizability of research findings from one population to another. This focus section provides a broad understanding of the German literature in this area, and many of the findings are similar to those published in English elsewhere in Europe and North America. However, comparative analyses would provide an indication of where similarities and differences lie, for example between those radicalized in different countries, to understand how different external factors (such as the political, economic and social context) affect radicalization, and how effective interventions might be for different populations and cultures.

#### 4 Conclusion

Acts of terrorism have increased in the West and are related to a range of different ideologies and other drivers. Understanding how, when and why individuals and groups come to support and conduct acts of extremist-related violence is necessary to inform and maximize the impact of P/CVE efforts. The literature on radicalization, extremism and terrorism is huge, and great progress has been made by scholars regarding the application of sound, empirical research methods to explore this field. However, the sheer quantity of literature, much of which is anecdotal, lacks rigor and/or fails to apply an evidence-based approach, meaning that it can be difficult to be clear regarding areas we are confident we understand and where there are gaps in our knowledge.

This focus section on the subject of radicalization provides the reader with a broad and up-to-date understanding of key concepts, themes and issues, and an in-depth understanding of specific topics, ongoing challenges and knowledge gaps. It also provides a solid basis to inform evidence-based practice and highlights practitioner requirements and gaps in understanding that need to be addressed. The knowledge presented here can therefore inform P/CVE efforts that need to be practical, feasible, affordable and evidence-based.

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