

Radicalization: Trajectories in Research, Policy and Practice

Sarah Marsden

University of St Andrews, United Kingdom
sm992@st-andrews.ac.uk

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Radicalization: Trajectories in Research, Policy and Practice

Sarah Marsden

University of St Andrews, United Kingdom

This focus section provides welcome evidence of the strength of research and practice on radicalization in Germany and reflects the dynamics of debates within international policy and scholarship. The papers focus on a range of areas of research on radicalization and violent extremism covering micro-, meso- and macro-level processes alongside methods for countering and preventing violent extremism. Although the papers clearly articulate the challenges associated with carrying out research in this field, they also demonstrate the increasing scope of scholarship that is helping to explain, interpret and respond to violent extremism.

By examining the wide-ranging influences on radicalization, this focus section extends an invitation to both broaden and deepen scholarship in the field: broadening research to develop more interdisciplinary, integrative frameworks to help interpret radicalization processes; and deepening it by interrogating and testing existing models and frameworks to develop more robust explanations of the pathways into and out of violence. This effort will be enhanced by greater use of theory from comparable areas of scholarship and by sustaining a research culture that nurtures rigorous, innovative methodologies able to capture the complexities of violent extremism. The papers in the focus section demonstrate that the field is in robust shape and sets the stage for further research on radicalization and violent extremism.

1 Contextualizing Micro-mobilization

Three papers focus on individual radicalization processes and testify to the growth in this area of scholarship by providing a rich overview of what we know about the radicalization process (Pisoiu et al. 2020), the role of the online environment (Winter et al. 2020), and the radicalization concept (Abay Gaspar et al. 2020). In reviewing the state of the art in these ar-

reas, the articles demonstrate the increasingly nuanced understanding of why people become involved in violent extremism, how we should understand the concepts and processes implicated in radicalization, and the means by which organizations and individuals use information and communication technology.

In different ways, the three papers seek to explain how individuals become engaged in extremism. In doing so, they draw attention to the importance of understanding the individual in their social and relational context. The challenge of understanding how different levels of analysis interact to help explain terrorism is a perennial one, highlighted by scholars throughout the canon of research on terrorism (Crenshaw 1981; Horgan 2004). Despite this, the most recent generation of research on radicalization has placed a particular emphasis on the individual, leading to calls for greater emphasis on social and interactional factors (Malthaner 2017). One of the reasons for this focus on the individual level is the way that political and public discourse has framed the radicalization problem in the West and the way this has created the context for research. Amongst other things, the radicalization construct identifies sites for intervention through preventative initiatives largely focused on the individual (Silva 2018). Approaching radicalization in this way, as a function of individual-level processes which might be amenable to change helps explain why the wider social, relational and political dynamics have not been subject to the same level of empirical investigation. It is therefore particularly welcome to see that although Pisoiu et al.'s contribution focuses on individual level processes, it also considers interactional factors alongside socialization processes.

Reflecting a similar commitment to understanding the complex, interacting factors that influence radicalization processes, Winter et al. offer a detailed re-

view of the literature on the role of the internet, drawing two conclusions. First, that those involved in violent extremism use the internet in much the same way others do, with little evidence of innovation. And second, that there is little utility in distinguishing between online and offline processes. It has become increasingly clear that this distinction offers few analytical or explanatory gains and is, as Gill et al. (2017) suggest, likely to be a false dichotomy.

In a similar way to PISOIU et al., Winter et al.'s review demonstrates the range of factors that shape radicalization processes. In doing so, both papers highlight three ways in which the field can build on the valuable work carried out to date. First by pursuing the benefits of developing broader integrative, interdisciplinary approaches able to take account of the complex ways in which people become engaged in violent extremism; second, to make greater use of theory development and testing in order to support this effort; and third, to adopt a more rigorous and pluralistic methodological approach to examining radicalization processes.

Although there is broad agreement about the push and pull factors that shape involvement in violent extremism, these require much further verification, replication and analysis before the field can lay claim to a truly evidence-based approach to policy and practice (Vergani et al. 2018). They would also, as Paul Gill (2015) has argued, benefit from addressing a number of conceptual and methodological issues. These include understanding the relative importance of the range of radicalization factors identified in the literature; how these cluster together; how they concatenate into sequences of behavior; and how these factors differ across different kinds of violent extremist. A wave of research, amply described in the focus section, has interrogated the causes of radicalization, now it is time to look in more detail at which factors are relevant for what kinds of actor, when, and under what circumstances.

A great deal can be learned by looking at how fields facing comparable challenges have addressed these issues of synthesis, method and theory. For example, the field of health research developed the Cochrane Collaboration as a means of identifying the most robust evidence about the impact of interventions. By

developing standards for judging the rigour of research, including having clear methodological criteria and publication standards, the Campbell Collaboration approach has made it easier to understand the strength of the evidence and identify the most promising directions for research. Increasingly this approach is being adopted in relation to public policy through the Campbell Collaboration, which provides a similarly robust way of identifying the most reliable, valid and relevant evidence. It does this by publishing systematic reviews and providing guidance on standards for primary data collection. The gradual increase in the number of systematic reviews being carried out in the field of violent extremism is welcome (see for example, Hassan et al. 2018; Mazerolle, Higinson, and Cherney 2019; Carvalho et al. 2019) and promises to provide a robust foundation for the next generation of research.

As well as empirical developments, valuable progress has been made on the question of how to conceptualize radicalization. Abay Gaspar et al.'s contribution to the focus section provides a welcome reassessment of the radicalization construct, helpfully drawing attention to the normative issues implicated in efforts to interpret and counter extremism. By problematizing the concept of radicalization in relation to how liberal societies have understood and responded to the threat of terrorism, the paper provides a helpful reminder that what is considered extreme or radical changes over time. Reflecting on this elucidates not only the landscape of contemporary threats, but also how public perceptions and social policies associated with those threats have the potential to shape wider social processes.

Abay Gaspar et al.'s paper invites scholars to interrogate the radicalization concept by highlighting the range of ways it relates to violence. Making the argument that radicalization occurs within violent settings, as well as taking place without violence, the authors draw attention to the narrow way that the concept has come to be understood. Given the increasing securitization of different areas of public life justified by efforts to prevent radicalization, the paper highlights the benefits of looking more holistically at the concept of radicalization. Taking a more historically informed approach makes it possible to reclaim some

of the past meaning of radicalism before it became so heavily bound up with violence (Malthaner 2017). Increasingly, research is problematizing the relationship between violence and radicalization (Khalil, Horgan, and Zeuthen 2019; Reidy 2018). Abay Gaspar et al.'s paper makes a valuable contribution to these debates and demonstrates the benefits of placing normative questions at the heart of conceptualizing and analyzing radicalization.

2 Relational processes of radicalization

As described above, one of the challenges of the burgeoning work on radicalization is how to interpret the relative importance of the wide range of individual-level factors that have been identified in the literature. Meiering et al. explore one way of addressing this issue by focusing on a different level of analysis, arguing that 'the sheer diversity of underlying motivations as well as biographical and external drivers leads us to the conclusion that addressing the meso-sociological mechanisms of radicalization is indeed more effective'. The paper demonstrates the benefit of broadening analysis beyond the individual level, to draw on sociological concepts and theories able to help interpret radicalization processes. In line with the growing body of work that intersects scholarship on social movements and political violence (Lindekilde, Malthaner, and O'Connor 2019; Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou 2015; Demetriou /Alimi 2018; della Porta 2013), Meiering, Dziri and Foroutan's (2020) paper makes a persuasive case for continuing to mine the literature on contentious politics to identify mechanisms and processes that help explain the dynamics of radicalization.

Addressing the call for more comparative work on radicalization, which is underlined by several other papers in the focus section, Meiering, Dziri and Foroutan look in detail at bridging narratives, or narrative structures used by different groups to instill a shared sense of identity and to frame particular problems and solutions. The paper suggests that these narrative structures help to enable social bridging (the links between radical groups), social bonding (enhancing in-group radicalization), and social linking (influencing a wider swathe of society). In this way, the paper demonstrates the benefits of examining relational

processes of radicalization within and among groups, and between groups and their state opponents.

The kind of comparative analysis undertaken by Meiering, Dziri and Foroutan helps to understand the factors that operate across radical groups enabling researchers to develop more concrete conceptualizations of radicalization processes. One of the most interesting perspectives presented by Meiering, Dziri and Foroutan is the invitation to consider how the radicalization of society is made possible through counter-cultural processes. As the alt-right has demonstrated, the effort to change politics by influencing culture is a potent tool which has the potential to exert greater influence at the societal level than the micro-mobilization processes which have been the emphasis of so much scholarship (Ebner 2019). Further research is needed to unpack these dynamics, through rigorous comparative analysis which helps to elucidate when, where and how radical counter-cultural forces are able to affect change, and the circumstances under which they fail.

3 Societal Dynamics

Up until relatively recently, limited attention was paid to the idea of societal radicalization. With the rise of populism and the 'culture wars' that are a growing feature of public and political debate, researchers are looking in more detail at how these processes play out (Berlet and Lyons 2018). Herschinger et al.'s (2020) contribution to the focus section steps into this space. By examining how wider socio- and geopolitical dynamics shape the potential for dissent, the paper invites us to think more broadly about the radicalization concept. This is important as it is here, at the societal level, where there is greater scope for harm to emerge. The paper identifies polarization as a kind of master process that shapes social and individual level behavior and enables radicalization, providing a useful way of framing and interpreting the dynamics of this form of political contention.

The positions Herschinger et al. set out suggest a number of directions for future research. The overall point about the influence individuals, groups and societies have on one another is well made. Similarly, by describing the potential influence of factors such as populism, migration, Islamophobia, re-nationalization

and anti-Semitism, the paper helpfully reviews some of the dynamics relevant to interpreting radicalization processes. What we need now is a better understanding of what influences these processes, and how, so we might better understand the nature and outcome of interactions between violent oppositional groups, the individuals that comprise them, and wider society. Conceptual and methodological clarity is vital as this research trajectory develops momentum. As Herschinger et al. point out, the notion of what is radical is normative and its dynamics are complex. Given the power of the radicalization construct to facilitate the securitization of growing areas of public life, it is important that analysis carefully delineates the concepts and methods it uses to understand how societies are both sites and subjects of radicalization.

4 Effectively Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

All of the papers in the focus section convey valuable insights about how to reduce the potential for harm from violent extremist groups. While Nehlsen et al. (2020) interrogate efforts to interpret the impact and effectiveness of preventative initiatives, Baaken et al. (2020) focus on work with those already heavily involved in extremism, offering a valuable practitioner-oriented perspective on research and policy on deradicalization. In different ways both papers point to the progress that has been made in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), whilst highlighting where attention needs to focus next.

One of the challenges for P/CVE is the strength of the evidence base. As Nehlsen et al. and Baaken et al. explain, policy has moved faster than research which means the foundation for much work in this space lacks a robust evidentiary basis. There are good reasons for this. With the growth of the threat from, in particular, militant Islamism since 9/11, policymakers and practitioners were faced with a need to respond before the evidence-base around 'what works' had fully developed (Lloyd and Dean 2015).

Nehlsen et al. address a central question in research on P/CVE, by examining what we know about the impact and effectiveness of interventions. The paper describes a number of challenges facing evaluation work that help to explain why we do not yet have a strong

evidence base around what works. One is the wide range of P/CVE initiatives, which demand different approaches to understanding their effects. Further challenges are caused by a lack of clarity over the most appropriate and comparable concepts, measures and metrics to use. Together, this means we do not yet have a strong evidence base to inform efforts to prevent extremism, or counter it as it emerges.

Although comparatively few interventions have been independently evaluated (Khalil and Zeuthen 2016), things are improving. Increasingly, researchers and practitioners are drawing on best practice from other fields to address the challenges associated with understanding the impact of P/CVE initiatives. The use of theories of change and realist evaluation methods is expanding the evidence base, and we are beginning to understand the factors that support and undermine primary, secondary and tertiary prevention initiatives (Gielen 2018; Cherney 2020; Marsden 2017).

Continuing to learn from other fields which face comparable evaluative challenges remains important. For example, work on gang interventions has found ways of understanding the impact of initiatives where, for practical or ethical reasons, it is not possible to compare the outcomes of a control group which does not benefit from the intervention with one that does. By developing data labs and employing community-based commissioners to identify independent groups which provide baseline measures in lieu of a control group, researchers have begun to understand the impact of gang interventions (Davies, Warnes, and Hofman 2017). Using multiple evaluation methods delivered by independent, external evaluators is also a model that work on P/CVE initiatives could make greater use of to enable a more transparent, robust and holistic approach to assessing the impact of interventions (Feddes and Gallucci 2015).

Evaluation is complicated by conceptual as well as empirical issues. As Baaken et al. explain, those working in the P/CVE field have different understandings of concepts like extremism and radicalization. The implications of these definitional issues differ across the communities engaged in P/CVE. For researchers, conceptual debates are not unusual, and as Abay Gaspar et al. point out, many topics in social science are essentially contested concepts. This is not necessarily a

problem, as conceptual debate helps clarify and contest the boundaries of the ideas we use in ways which can produce new insights and critical reflections. However, for practitioners – particularly those working in multi-stakeholder settings – or for people seeking to draw international comparisons, this can be more problematic. With this in mind, it is perhaps helpful to recognize that the priorities of the different communities engaged in P/CVE are shaped by their identities and interests and that it is almost inevitable that this will lead to definitional and conceptual disagreements (Marsden, forthcoming). What remains important is that the space for debate remains open but does not become so contested or abstract as to substantively hamper the work of practitioners tasked with preventing violent extremism or researchers understanding the dynamics at work.

5 Looking Ahead

Although focused on the German context, all the papers in the focus section reflect international debates about the quality and conceptual clarity of the research base. The broad contours of these debates celebrate the increased empirical and conceptual detail in the field, whilst highlighting the benefits of greater methodological rigour and a stronger evidence base to inform policy and practice. Most of the papers refer to the benefits of a more robust empirical foundation from which to build the next generation of research on radicalization. As a number of the authors suggest, this will demand a pluralistic disciplinary approach that develops comparative insights into radicalization processes informed by robust methods and a thoughtful application of theory.

There is much to learn, and all of the papers set out significant new directions for research, but it remains important to think carefully about what we already know. With the burgeoning number of models, frameworks and conceptualizations of radicalization and extremism, it is now important to undertake further comparative empirical analysis to learn which approaches have the greatest potential to help explain and understand how and why people become engaged in and disengage from radical settings. In this way, research can begin to address the challenges facing the field identified by the papers in the focus sec-

tion, and those raised in the wider literature (Gill 2015; Schuurman 2018). Drawing together interdisciplinary teams of researchers and developing multi-level frameworks able to account for the interactions between micro-, meso- and macro-level factors to contextualize radicalization processes and open up further areas for research, policy and practice is one way of doing this. The papers in the focus section are testament to a field that is evolving rapidly and has a healthy understanding of the weaknesses and opportunities that make up the research landscape. Now it is a case of addressing them with methodological rigour, analytical pluralism, and theoretical innovation.

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