A Practitioner's Response to 'Understanding Radicalisation: Implications for Criminal Justice Practitioners'

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Summary: This is a practitioner's response to 'Understanding radicalisation: Implications for criminal justice practitioners' by Orla Lynch (*Irish Probation Journal*, 2017). That article examined the complexities of defining the processes of radicalisation alongside the challenges for criminal justice professionals in responding to radicalised persons. This response considers the key points highlighted by Lynch and reflects on how we as professionals may begin to better understand and engage with radicalised persons. Further, it engages with some of the possible methods of assessment and intervention highlighted by Lynch and considers how they could be utilised in practice. These include the Returnee 45 model and the Community Policing and Radicalisation model. The importance of community embeddedness and legitimacy and a clear focus on the care of individuals and communities, as part of a response to radicalisation, is also highlighted.

Keywords: Radicalisation, probation, terrorism, de-radicalisation, disengagement, assessment, intervention, care, community engagement.

Introduction

In reading and thinking about Orla Lynch's (2017) article on how we understand and respond to radicalisation, I was left with a number of questions. Firstly, what were my own assumptions about who becomes radicalised and what biases do I carry in this regard? Secondly, what are the challenges for us as practitioners in recognising, assessing and supervising those who are radicalised or at risk of radicalisation? Thirdly, what methods and models could we begin to think about as part of a potential response to this phenomenon?

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Making assumptions

Reflecting on Lynch's article gave me pause to consider the type of person that comes to mind when the topic of radicalisation is raised. The reality is that the rise of Islamic terrorism in this century has undoubtedly left me with a distorted view of who might become radicalised. Whatever biases I may hold are clearly challenged by the reality that not all acts of terrorism have their roots in Islamic extremism. Any presumptions I might make in this regard should be rightfully challenged by the clear displays of far-right terrorism such as that seen in the killing of British MP Jo Cox or the Finsbury Park Mosque attack. Mark Rowley, the outgoing chief of the United Kingdom's counterterrorism police, noted a sharp increase in the risk posed by far-right terrorist groups (Grierson, 2018). Similarly, such a rise in far-right activity and violence, often allying closely with democratic political parties, has become increasingly evident in continental Europe (Holleran, 2018). These far-right groups have positioned themselves not only in opposition to the Islamic faith and their perception of its aims, but also against immigrants regardless of their faith. I share these reflections to highlight the implicit biases we may carry with us into our practice when radicalisation is being discussed.

Lynch stresses the need to separate out the notion of the *terrorist* from *terrorism* to allow us to ground our understanding of perpetrators within their day-to-day lives (2017: 80). She argues that such a grounding can provide a space for perpetrators to reveal their motivations and justifications, contending that an individual's path towards radicalisation can be rooted in mundane and ordinary processes such as peer pressure and family loyalty. It could be argued that these driving factors are not alien to probation staff, as they can feature in processes of criminalisation more generally. The key messages Lynch delivers in this part of the paper is that motives for individuals who participate in political violence are varied, can change depending on a person's level of engagement and can be retrofitted with meaning by perpetrators.

I believe that we need to consider radicalisation as a continuum of extreme behaviours grounded in often complex individual and group dynamics and situations. As mentioned in the original piece, Ireland's experiences of terrorism are rooted both historically and contemporarily in our differing religious, political and social beliefs, as well as in some of the driving factors for individuals mentioned above.

If as practitioners we merely satisfy ourselves that radicalisation is simply a problem with service users of certain faiths, or is emerging from certain parts of the world, the consequences could be potentially damaging. Such a starting position could result in the belief that only a small number of a particular type of person within our service user population is at risk of radicalisation. We could become complacent, both organisationally and as individual practitioners, and this could contribute to a belief that we have little to do in terms of examining how we assess, respond to and challenge radicalised persons.

We should be mindful of the point raised by Lynch (2017): that terrorist acts are not necessarily the result of a clear-cut path from social activism. I think this opens up an area that it is valuable for us to consider, particularly in terms of some of the young men who are referred to us. For instance, patterns of behaviour, such as a willingness to use violence, a propensity to act impulsively and a disregard for consequences, can be utilised for the sake of a cause in which the perpetrator may not necessarily believe. Furthermore, the sense of meaning that many people – not just those who criminally offend – are seeking may be found through engagement in a movement. Whether the process of radicalisation occurs rapidly without a clear path of social activism or in the context of being part of a movement, it is incumbent on us to try to understand service users' lives and relationships. An understanding of such factors puts us in a better position to recognise when service users are going through a cognitive or behavioural change and what this may mean.

Challenges for practitioners

Lynch clearly delineates efforts at guiding people away from radicalisation into two categories: disengagement and de-radicalisation. I reflected on both of these from a practitioner's perspective and in the context in which we work.

Given that disengagement implies tolerance of a set of beliefs provided they are not accompanied by violence, what does this mean for how we might potentially work with radicalised persons? I think the answer to this question depends on the particular stance we adopt. If we take a public safety perspective, then it may be *good enough* to ensure that a person has disengaged from violence, and in doing so prevent further harm to the public. However, do we miss an opportunity to assist

the individual in building a better, more meaningful life for themselves and those around them if we focus solely on disengagement from crime? I suggest that being satisfied with disengagement could serve to portray the service user as merely a violent actor devoid of any hope for a better life and minimise any efforts to truly (re)integrate them into society.

If we consider de-radicalisation, I think there are a further set of challenges. Firstly – and the original article identified this – sensitive political and religious issues are being introduced into the service user–practitioner relationship. Further, I envisage that if we are to take the challenge of de-radicalising seriously, we need to be equipped not only with a knowledge of the various processes of radicalisation, but also of the belief systems possibly contributing to it. While acknowledging the challenges of responding to radicalisation, I believe that such an approach may serve multiple objectives in terms of contributing to public safety and, if handled sensitively, responding to the individual service user's need for a better life. There may well be scope in working towards this aim for utilising some of the methods that already form part of probation practice, such as the Good Lives Model (Ward and Stewart, 2003) with its emphasis on assisting those who have offended in attaining primary human goods.

Specific to social work practice, there is evidence that radicalisation remains an uncomfortable area of intervention for social workers generally. For instance, in research exploring how English local authorities were responding to radicalisation, Chisholm and Coulter (2017) found that social work participants were very aware of ongoing public debates about radicalisation but that there were broad differences in how the issue was internally defined by local authorities. This study also found that while staff identify some similarities between radicalisation and other forms of child exploitation, they reported less confidence in responding to the former. This research identified a number of barriers to effective practice, underpinned by a view that both intervening and not intervening carried risks. One of the central drivers of lowered staff confidence was the lack of clear agency definitions and direction in relation to radicalisation. Other concerns identified included the view of communities that social workers lacked legitimacy, and challenges of a multi-agency response and to the legitimacy of interventions. In reading this research, one is struck by the interconnectedness of the challenges. For example, some staff recognised that they were over-zealous in identifying a risk of radicalisation and it was possible that

this, in turn, decreased their defensibility. There were examples of how some local authorities had addressed these challenges through, for example, having a single referrer and building an evidence base from previous learning.

Given the clearly identified challenges in responding effectively to radicalisation, we may understandably be left with a deep sense of uncertainty or even paralysis about when and how to respond when we believe a person is or has been radicalised. In the midst of uncertainty, the danger is that we rely on our traditional ways of responding to offending without due regard for the unique individual journey and challenges of radicalisation. Relying on traditional ways of working or indeed basing our intervention on shaky presumptions about which people become radicalised, and why, leaves us at risk of failing in our responsibility to both the public and service users.

Potential methods and models for intervention

There is clearly no neat solution to how we respond to this phenomenon, given that radicalisation is 'fluctuating and unpredictable' (Vermeulen and Bovenkerk, 2012: 19). In the original article, Lynch clearly articulates the pitfalls of the current actuarial risk assessments aimed at radicalisation. I would suggest that we face a further challenge in assessing radicalisation in an Irish context given our limited experience, when compared to our continental European counterparts, of working with racial or religiously motivated crime. While this is not insurmountable, it will require an increased awareness and commitment to developing methods to assess and respond to the dynamics particular to involvement in terrorism.

Lynch highlights the potential benefits of the Returnee 45 model used to shape and guide practice in regard to returning foreign fighters. This is evidently useful in providing a framework for assessment and case management. While it is intended for use with those returning to the West having been involved in foreign conflicts, I would suggest that there are elements of the model that could be considered in responses to other forms of radicalisation.

While easy answers do not exist, there are examples of practice that we can draw on in beginning to think about how we as practitioners respond to radicalisation. For example, the CoPPRa (Community Policing and the Prevention of Radicalisation) model developed in

Belgium and funded through the European Union (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017) is a model based on the assumption that frontline police officers have an important role to play in preventing radicalisation because they work on the ground, understand their local communities and tend to have good community knowledge. It recognises that despite these advantages many community police lack the knowledge to spot early signs of radicalisation within the communities they police. The project aims to address this gap through the provision of practical information and training materials about radicalisation.

The CoPPRa model utilises a very useful schema of a 'staircase' to a terrorist act, developed by Moghaddam (2005), which suggests that people move through stages, beginning at 'unhappy people in society' through a number of steps to 'terrorism'. The staircase narrows as it moves toward the terrorist act, symbolising a narrowing of options other than violence. There is an implication within this schema that the process can be disrupted, people can move out at various stages and a terrorist act is not the inevitable conclusion. Further, if a person reaches the terrorist act, there will have been a number of warning signs worthy of intervention on their own merits (de Geode and Simon, 2013: 322). The CoPPRa model is applicable to a range of radicalisation processes not necessarily connected with a specific group. Furthermore, the underpinning belief in such a model, i.e. *that terrorism ultimately occurs when people cannot find traditional means of solving problems*, while perhaps overly broad, has some similarity with criminological theory and should be considered useful. For example, the work of left realist criminologists is based on the view that crime is likely to occur where people cannot access political solutions to the problems with which they are faced (Lea and Young, 1984: 88; Young, 1999).

The underlying principle of the CoPPRa model is to support professionals who have, by nature of their roles, achieved some degree of community embeddedness. In many ways, practitioners working for state institutions in a small state like the Republic of Ireland could feasibly embed themselves in service user communities more easily than in larger, more complex societies. However, working in and, importantly, working *with* such communities to identify and respond to radicalisation will not happen without significant vision, strategy and effort. Our first task needs to be to define what we mean by community: are we seeking to strengthen our connections with specific geographic areas or with groups of people? My answer is that both aspects need to be strengthened to operate a

model like CoPPRa, which requires an interconnectedness between the security/civil arms of the state and the caring part of the state.

This requires the utilisation of civil society to identify the burgeoning signs of radicalisation. This can only be possible if we are rooted in and relevant to communities. If we as practitioners are seen either as irrelevant or as meddling outsiders, our lack of legitimacy, perceived or otherwise, will negate our capacity to draw on the knowledge of communities, both geographic and social. This approach would inevitably necessitate closer connections between civil society members (e.g. teachers, social workers, youth workers) and the security infrastructure. Such a bringing together requires further exploration and debate, but my view is that it should be conducted with a strong care focus, i.e. *radicalisation is ultimately harmful, we care about you and your community, and we will try to work with you to stop it.*

Such care-focused interventions may be more palatable to practitioners, who may see them as aligned to core social work and social justice principles in seeking to care for communities. However, I believe caution should be exercised even if we are approaching radicalisation from a care perspective. We need to be mindful of whose values we are seeking to fulfil, and not unthinkingly believe that values that are not our own are necessarily dangerous. However, I believe that responding to the dangers of radicalisation from a care-focused perspective would serve to maintain a coherence to social work values and place relationship- and community-building at its core. Furthermore, such a care focus opens up opportunities to view those at risk of radicalisation as potential victims within their own life stories.

Conclusion

On reading Orla Lynch's article, I was left with a number of thoughts. Firstly, the challenge of responding to radicalisation for probation services throughout Europe is complex and challenging. Secondly, from a personal perspective, radicalisation can too easily be something happening 'out there'. Given that terrorism has occurred on the island on which I live, and in recent months has occurred in major cities of our nearest neighbour, there is an imperative that we recognise and respond to it as a reality. Within this recognition and response, there is a need for us as practitioners to examine and interrogate the ways in which we work

and to seek out means of responding to radicalisation as part of a progressive modernising agenda of practice.

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