

Understanding Radicalisation: Implications for Criminal Justice Practitioners

Orla Lynch*

Summary: Over the past 16 years, academics and practitioners have made significant attempts to develop our understanding of the process by which individuals come to engage with violent extremism. In the case of terrorist violence, the process leading to engagement with extremist organisations came to be referred to as radicalisation, a loose and vague term that accounts for the means by which an individual comes to support, engage with or carry out a terrorist act in support of or as a member of a terrorist movement. A failure to account for the diversity of pathways into terrorism is a weakness in how we think about radicalisation and terrorism because, as with any other complex human behaviour (e.g. crime), we cannot causally link one isolated factor to the behaviour itself. This article advocates that there may not be a single identifiable *cause* for an individual's choice to engage in terrorism and instead we should consider that focusing on a range of psychosocial risk factors may be more appropriate. In addition, it highlights the limitations of psychometric assessment approaches to radicalisation. Existing best-practice approaches to dealing with prisoners and probationers, created within established criminal justice protocols, are most appropriate.

Keywords: Terrorism, radicalisation, criminal justice, practitioner.

Introduction

In recent years we have witnessed the rise to prominence of sub-state violence, linked to specific ideological positions, on Western targets (Sanger-Katz, 2016). As part of this phenomenon, within Europe a polarisation of identity positions has occurred whereby right-wing, neo-Nazi movements have positioned themselves as the defenders of Europe

* Dr Orla Lynch is a psychologist and Lecturer in Criminology at University College Cork (email: orla.lynych@ucc.ie). She is also a fellow with Hedayah (GCTF) and a board member of the European Commission Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN).

against Islamic-inspired extremist violence (Tausch, 2016). In response, Muslim communities have rightly sought to defend their place in Europe, and civil rights anti-racist organisations have sought to counter the often inflammatory rhetoric of the right-wing movements (Lynch, 2013).

This dichotomy plays out at a local level but also at the national political level. The extremist rhetoric espoused by the violent right-wing factions as well as the extremist Islamist organisations is part of the rise of ideologically based identity movements. Fringe elements within right-wing movements and extremist Islamist organisations have carried out violence in pursuit of their ideological and organisational goals; the resulting terrorism is constructed as both a security threat to the West and an existential threat to national and regional values.

While this polarisation and the subsequent support for and engagement in terrorist violence seem to be intertwined, at least in terms of the narratives surrounding both, it is important that when we seek to understand political violence, we recognise it for what it is – a fringe, extremist phenomenon. We must bear in mind that the actions of terrorist actors are not necessarily the result of some clear-cut pathway that starts with social activism or radical politics and ends in violent extremism; it is vital that we take an evidence-based approach when attempting to understand terrorism.

Given the hype surrounding terrorism and the political currency of applying the label selectively (Horgan, 2005), we need to ensure that our analysis is grounded, and this is particularly the case for individuals working with perpetrators of political violence.

Terrorism and terrorist

When we seek to understand terrorism, it is vital that we separate the notion of *terrorism* from the *terrorist* (Lynch and Joyce, 2018). Terrorism is a highly politicised term, a pejorative label applied unevenly across groups and states potentially deserving of the label (Horgan, 2005). However, for criminal justice professionals acting within the confines of a particular legal system, the terrorist actor must be understood and considered in his/her local context in conjunction with the entirety of their social network, personal background, ideological affiliations and offending history.

Separating these two notions, *terrorism* and the *terrorist*, helps to ground our understanding of the individual perpetrator in the relevant realities of

their day-to-day life. For practitioners working with individuals convicted of terrorism or terrorism-related offences, taking such an approach is exceptionally revealing as it can expose the nuanced motives and justifications an individual may offer for their involvement in terrorism (or their desire to be involved), mundane as they may turn out to be. In addition, such an approach can reveal the process by which they came to be involved in the first place and as such offers significant insights for developing interventions appropriate for that individual.

A key issue here, which seems to proliferate through our understanding of terrorism and the process of radicalisation, is that of isolation: conceptual isolation, historic isolation and professional practice isolation. The issue of terrorism is not new, terrorism did not begin at 9/11, and dealing with terrorist actors in the prison and Probation services has long been a part of the normal functioning of the criminal justice system across Europe (Page, 1998). We know for example that in Germany, prison authorities are still dealing with members of the Red Army Faction. This is also true for the authorities in the UK and Ireland in relation to prisoners linked with paramilitary organisations, and Norway and Sweden regularly deal with right-wing terrorists within their prison system (Hemmingby and Bjorgo, 2015).

While all instances of terrorism are not directly comparable at a political level, the mechanisms that underlie radicalisation and terrorism are built on our understanding of individual and group behaviours. These processes are more accessible and identifiable than any politicised conceptualisation of terrorism and radicalisation. It is therefore important that we recognise the role of existing research that addresses separate but related issues of concern. These include pathways into crime from the discipline of criminology, group dynamics from the field of psychology, and social movements from sociology. Understanding terrorism and radicalisation cannot emerge solely from *de novo* analysis of current affairs, but should be constructed on a nuanced understanding of the components of the complex individual and group behaviours that constitute terrorism.

Engagement

Over the past 16 years, academics and practitioners across the globe have tried to develop our understanding of the process by which individuals come to engage with violent extremism (Horgan, 2005, 2014; Neumann, 2016). In the case of terrorist violence, the process leading to engagement

with extremist organisations or groups came to be referred to as radicalisation. This is a loose and vague term relating to the means by which an individual comes to support, engage with or carry out a terrorist act in support of or as a member of a terrorist movement (Schmid, 2013). The term has predominantly been used in conjunction with Islamic extremism post 9/11, but is increasingly applied to a broader range of ideological movements engaged in violent extremism (Schmid, 2013).

Regardless of the imprecise nature of the term ‘radicalisation’, it is widely used by practitioners, academics and policy-makers, often interchangeably with the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’. How these terms relate to each other, what if any is the causal relationship between them and what explanatory power they have is complex and contested (Neumann, 2013).

As mentioned, the term ‘radicalisation’ is popularly used to refer to some process that is assumed to culminate in terrorist activity; however, it does not explain how this process is undertaken or what the process might look like (Schmid, 2013). Radicalisation has often been portrayed, somewhat confusingly, as a causative process, leading to the presumption that the phenomenon itself is the *cause* of terrorist activity, but people engage in terrorism for many reasons: peer pressure, opportunity, family history, boredom, ideology, politics, etc. (Horgan, 2014).

Given that there are multiple reasons why people become involved in terrorism and many pathways into terrorism, we must be careful to separate the process of embracing radical ideas and/or engaging in radical behaviour from the motive for doing so (Moselenko and McCauley, 2011; Horgan, 2014). Also, one’s stated motive for engaging in terrorism is often constructed after the fact and has a self-preserving purpose (e.g. claims of victimisation, oppression, defence of community) (Lynch and Joyce, 2016). There can be many varied motives for individuals who participate in political violence, and these motives can change retrospectively as the level of engagement with a group or network develops.

Another important issue for individuals working with perpetrators of terrorism and political violence is how we understand and attribute the *reasons* for radicalisation and ultimately involvement in terrorism. As with our understanding of crime, many hypotheses have been proposed to account for an individual’s choice to engage in terrorism – mental health issues, poverty, oppression, disenfranchisement, etc. (DeAngelis, 2009) – but there is no ‘silver bullet’ (Corner and Gill, 2017).

Mental illness has not been definitively identified as a cause of terrorism, nor can we point to a particular combination of vulnerabilities to explain the choice to become involved. However, even if involvement in terrorism cannot be causally attributed to mental illness, such an approach is missing the point. The reasons for involvement are highly varied, and the ways in which they interact make it difficult to categorise the process of involvement meaningfully. Therefore, practitioners' focus should be dominated not by any (stated) ideological motives of the individuals, nor individual factors such as mental health, but by a holistic approach to understanding the individual, their interpersonal experiences, and their broader social interactions (Borum, 2011).

Radicalisation

Radicalisation is generally thought of as a journey of personal change, a shift from what might be considered a mainstream position to a more extreme condition – be that psychological or behavioural (Schmid, 2013). There is significant debate regarding how radicalisation happens, with some studies pointing to a key psychological moment (e.g. identity crisis), others to a contagion-type transmission of radicalisation between peer group members or between groups leaders and followers, and others still advocating that a progression through distinct stages of increasing commitment is central to the process.

As mentioned, a significant issue in thinking about radicalisation is that of ideology. Radicalisation can be thought of as a cognitive (psychological) change, a behavioural change, or both (Neumann, 2013). This means that that pathway into terrorism can happen both with and without an underlying ideological framework. However, non-ideological radicalisation is rarely attended to in the literature, and zero-sum categorisations such as ideological or non-ideological radicalisation rarely play out so cleanly in the real world.

Evidence regarding radicalization focuses on violent radicalization as opposed to non-violent radicalization, thus introducing a systematic bias in the literature, away from any radicalization process preceding terrorism but not resulting in acts of violence. (Scarcella *et al.*, 2016: 1)

This brings us to the issue of *motive*, which is central to how we think about radicalisation. If a cognitive shift does occur, and an ideological

framework subsequently underpins an individual's move from a non-radical to a radical, violent position, we often attribute motive to the ideology itself. However, when there is a behavioural radicalisation, in the absence of an ideological framework, we often seek other explanations or motives for becoming involved in terrorism (e.g. friendship, boredom, opportunity). This points to the fact (Horgan, 2005) that there are multiple, diverse and even competing processes that lead to engagement in terrorist activity or with a terrorist group and that no one factor should be prioritised in our analysis.

De-radicalisation and disengagement

A diversity of ways of becoming involved in terrorism logically leads to the assumption that there are multiple ways in which an individual can disengage from terrorist activity. However, efforts at encouraging individuals away from terrorist activity are generally categorised into two types: de-radicalisation and disengagement (Marsden, 2017).

De-radicalisation implies a process of attitudinal change whereby the cognitions underpinning the support for terrorism, drawn presumably from some form of extreme ideology, are addressed (Horgan, 2009). Most often de-radicalisation is spoken about in relation to Islamic extremism and, more recently, violence inspired by right-wing terrorism. Disengagement refers to intervention focused on the behavioural component of extremism; for example, the means by which individuals might become less involved with a particular organisation and there might then be a reduction in terrorist activity (Lynch, 2015).

This distinction brings up a number of important issues that are relevant to how we conceptualise terrorism and the terrorist. For example, a focus on disengagement implies a tolerance for the radical ideology provided that it is not accompanied by violent actions. On the other hand, de-radicalisation implies the *removal* of or reduction of the radical ideas that are assumed to underpin the violent behaviour.

While this distinction may seem pedantic, it is politically a very potent issue. This approach informs how the criminal justice system treats extremists based on their stated ideological affiliations including the risk assessment of such individuals, how they will be supervised in the community, and how they will be held while incarcerated.

‘Measuring’ radicalisation

Given the type and level of terrorist violence we have witnessed in the West over the past 16 years, there have been significant efforts by researchers and practitioners to develop a means of risk-assessing individuals suspected and convicted of engagement in extremist violence. This includes an estimation of their level of dangerousness and an attempt to account for the likelihood of recidivism.

There is a general agreement in the literature that violence as carried out by terrorist actors is somehow different from that expected from, say, psychiatric patients or other institutionalised individuals. The belief in the difference was due to the unlikelihood that terrorist actors suffered from a significant mental illness (Corner *et al.*, 2016; Horgan, 2005), and that their motivations were thought of as altruistic and not necessarily for personal gain.

In an effort to meet the needs of prison and Probation services as well as the criminal justice system, a number of instruments were developed to account for the likely risk an individual extremist might pose to society on release as well as to other prisoners while incarcerated. Given the critique above of how we think about terrorism and radicalisation, one can see how risk assessment instruments might be problematic. Perhaps one of the greatest weaknesses of these tools is their emergence in isolation from other well-established violence risk assessment instruments. In addition, the method by which the instruments were developed and tested is problematic, and issues such as external validity remain in question (Sarma, 2017).

Given that we do not have agreement on the criteria that definitively identify the factors that lead to engagement in terrorist violence, nor any means of judging dangerousness as it relates to ideology etc., the tools that exist to risk-assess terrorist actors are problematic to say the least. In addition, due to the relatively low incidence of terrorism in comparison to other instances of violence, it is very difficult to develop a reliable instrument grounded in empirical research and sufficiently tested with a suitable sample (Scarcella *et al.*, 2016).

Generic risk assessment tools are used in the criminal justice arena and tested using a significant sample size, but increasingly there is a trend towards the use of specific tools that have been developed to measure the risk of radicalisation and/or terrorism; these instruments are mostly used in the prison and/or Probation setting (Scarcella *et al.*, 2016).

Overview of current risk assessment instruments

In the UK, the National Offender Management Service, recently renamed Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), uses the Extremism Risk Guidelines (ERG22+) (Ranstorp, 2017). This instrument assesses 22 factors of radicalisation categorised into engagement, intent and capability. There was and is significant opposition to it, primarily because there was no peer review of the content in the public arena and the factors themselves were not released to the academic community for scrutiny. According to the *Guardian* (2016), more than 140 academics, including Noam Chomsky, protested against the use of the ERG22+ due to the lack of transparency around its development and deployment and the lack of scientific scrutiny of the assumptions that underpin it (Ross, 2016).

Another instrument used to assess individuals at risk of planning and executing a violent extremist attack is the VERA and its second iteration, the VERA 2 (Pressman, 2012). These are publicly available and are based on an analysis of beliefs, attitudes, historical background, commitment and motivation (Pressman, 2012). The VERA was designed to be used with individuals who are operational, i.e. actively engaged in extremist violence or having a history of extremist violence (Scarcella *et al.*, 2016). However, it is important to acknowledge that the VERA and VERA 2 are conceptual formulations based on the literature that already exists on radicalisation and terrorism (Scarcella *et al.*, 2016). Given the discussion above, we already know the weaknesses inherent in the literature, which are transplanted to the assessment tool.

Another instrument, recently developed by the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) Centre of Excellence and called the RAN Coe Returnee 45 (Ranstorp, 2017), aims to overcome the criticisms that have been levelled at radicalisation risk assessment instruments by taking a different approach.

The Returnee 45 is narrower in focus, as it is developed for use with returning foreign fighters (RFFs). It is an investigative tool rather than a risk assessment instrument, and aims to provide a framework for operational planning and intervention management. The tool is based on *risk behaviours* that have been identified in the literature and by experienced practitioners from across the EU who participate in RAN's working groups on RFFs and radicalisation. Like the VERA/VERA 2, the Returnee 45 includes *resilient* factors (factors that consider how an individual might be resistant to the process of radicalisation), but it also

focuses on how a multiagency intervention might be built around the individual RFF.

The Returnee 45 focuses on both internal and external measures of behaviour (e.g. grievance and the use of overt religious symbolism), cognitive styles (e.g. internal/external attribution, group identity bias) and social networks (online and offline). Personal/social history, trauma and disengagement processes are also accessed, as are integrative capacity, limits and personal and social resiliency (RAN Coe, 2017).

The Returnee 45 is strengthened by the fact that it is identified as a guide for planning rather than a tool for assessment, and it is aimed at assisting multi-agency interventions. The fact that it is heavily influenced by practitioner experience makes this planning instrument unique. However, like the other instruments available, it is yet to be tested with a suitable sample. Given that it does not make claims regarding its psychometric qualities, its utility as determined by a practitioner population, rather than its applicability to individual RFFs, may be the focus of review.¹

The Irish experience

Despite the emergence of a range of assessment instruments in the radicalisation space, there is historical amnesia surrounding the assessment and management of risk. If we consider, for example, how political prisoners, or subversives (as they are known in the Republic of Ireland), were (and are) dealt with in Ireland and Northern Ireland over the past 30 years, we discover a relatively unique means of addressing the issue of terrorism and political violence by prisons and the Probation services. The approach in question was and is devoid of any effort to predict involvement (or dangerousness) using terrorism or political violence as a framework.

The issue of a radical ideology was and is tangential to the treatment of individuals by the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland both pre- and post-sentencing. There is no suggestion that there should be any effort to *de-radicalise* these individuals. In fact, individuals who share a particular ideological position (e.g. Loyalism or Republicanism) were and are housed together in specific prison wings (for example, Portlaoise Prison) (Page, 1998). In the case of the Troubles and the participants involved in that conflict, the focus was on desistance,

¹ The author is a member of the editorial board of RAN, but was not involved in the production of the RAN Coe Returnee 45 tool.

ensuring that Loyalists and Republicans paramilitaries did not offend again on release.

There was and is no question that the radical 'loyalist' or 'secessionist' ideologies that may or may not underpin their behaviours should be challenged. There is an understanding that involvement in political violence is about much more than one's political or ideological persuasion (Lynch, 2015). In addition, there was no political imperative to require the paramilitary groups to disband, but only to *disarm*, again pointing to a tolerance for both the ideologies and the paramilitary organisations, but not the violence. This is a very different approach to that currently being taken across Europe in response to terrorist actors who are not inspired by loyalist or secessionist ideologies.

There are very different means of dealing with terrorism in Northern Ireland as compared to Islamic extremist terrorism in England. The difference is fundamentally related to the political and ideological affiliations of the perpetrators as well as the existence of a peace process. A fear of the potential for a contagion effect in prison, whereby radical inmates might seek to draw ordinary prisoners to their cause, is also relevant.

Conclusion

In an effort to counter violent extremism (CVE) and prevent violent extremism (PVE), and in response to the upswing in violent Islamic extremism and violent right-wing terrorism over the past 15 years, states, international organisations, charities and research institutes have developed bespoke approaches for dealing with radicalisation and terrorism. These are based on particular interpretations of the role of ideology in radicalisation into terrorism as well as varied appreciations of the other psychosocial factors that are relevant to understanding the pathways into political violence.

However, these approaches become more controversial when we try to understand their rationale. According to the Peace Monitoring Report, since 2014, 50 individuals were shot by paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland and in 2016 alone, there were 72 casualties of the security situation in Northern Ireland (Wilson, 2016). This of course raises the question: why are such vastly different approaches taken to what is ultimately terrorist activity?

It brings us back to the issue of separating the ‘terrorist’ from the ‘terrorism’ and how this approach is useful for returning to first principles and understanding political violence as primarily law breaking, interpersonal violence and inter-/intra-group activity. Also, it brings up the question of learning from the past and the need for an open and holistic view when considering how best to deal with the more recent iterations of radical extremism.

As mentioned earlier, a belief that ideology is causal and so somehow responsible for one’s involvement in terrorism underpins a de-radicalisation approach with the terrorist actor. This approach focuses on the details of the ideology, how the ideology may or may not be a misinterpretation of, for example, a holy book, how the subscription to that ideology impacts on the life trajectory of the individual in question, and other critical thinking and cognitive techniques. On the other hand, a recognition of the complexity of individual motives and the interactivity of individual and social processes and their relevance for involvement in terrorism suggests that attitudinal change alone is not sufficient or, in some cases, even appropriate.

It may be that a desistance or disengagement approach, where the emphasis is on an individual’s social networks, reintegration (or integration) into an appropriate community, increasing an individual’s social capital, ensuring opportunities to contribute to society (education, employment), and ensuring that the individual has a voice with which to express concerns, grievances, etc. related to their support for a violent campaign may provide better outcomes. In reality, however, despite the conceptual distinctions described, interventions that are undertaken across Europe with ex-prisoners convicted of terrorism and related offences are most likely to be a combination of the de-radicalisation and the disengagement approaches (Butt and Tuck, 2014).

A failure to account for the diversity of possible pathways into political violence is a weakness in how we think about radicalisation and terrorism because, as with any other complex human behaviour (e.g. crime), we cannot causally link one isolated factor to the behaviour itself. More problematically in the case of radicalisation, the possibility that there is no single identifiable cause for an individual’s choice to engage in terrorism must be considered, and a focus on a range of psychosocial risk factors may be more appropriate.

We are still left with the desire to identify any vulnerabilities/risk factors, and that creates further problems. These vulnerabilities are

wide-ranging and do not necessarily discriminate between those who are (potentially) radical and those who are not or will never be. This challenge becomes all the more problematic when we attempt to measure risk, and identify potential radicals based on these risk factors or vulnerabilities. As mentioned earlier in this article, the factors that form the basis of any assessment method lack a solid empirical foundation, fail to discriminate between violent actors and non-violent actors and, as such, provide a false sense of security regarding our ability to identify high-risk individuals. Of course, we also risk falsely accusing individuals, with all the implications that this would bring.

This short review of the state of radicalisation research and assessment tools hardly does justice to the vast body of work that exists in this field and the excellent work of a number of scholars. It does highlight for criminal justice professionals some of the pitfalls inherent in exceptionalising terrorism and focusing overly on radicalisation as a causal and/or explanatory framework for understanding the choice to engage in political violence.

There is a reservoir of knowledge across Europe about how to deal with individuals who participate in political violence and terrorism that can and should be accessed by criminal justice professionals. This material (such as that produced by the RAN, Europe) is based on the experience of professionals who have worked with radicals, extremists, terrorists, subversives, etc. over the past four decades.

Overall, this article aims to highlight the limits of structured assessment approaches to dealing with radicalisation and, instead, recognise the strengths of existing best practice methods of dealing with prisoners and probationers within established criminal justice protocols.

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