
One Man's Radical: The Radicalisation Debate and Australian Counterterrorism Policy

Nell Bennett

Australia's counterterrorism policy is often justified publicly by the perceived threat of radicalisation. The purported rise of radicalisation, however, is based on conflicting academic opinion and limited empirical evidence. This article examines the radicalisation discourse and argues that there is no consensus in the field as to how a person can become radicalised, or even what the end point of radicalisation should be. Furthermore, scholars are yet to formulate a persuasive explanation for how ideas can actually lead to violence. The radicalisation debate may result in the securitisation of unconventional views, which could threaten the freedom of political discourse that underpins the Australian democratic system.

Much of Australian counterterrorism policy is based on the perceived threat of radicalisation. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has called "radical, violent, extremist Islam" the greatest threat to Australian national security.¹ This article will examine the term 'radicalisation' and argue that it fails to capture the complexity of contemporary terrorist violence. However, its limited explanatory value has done little to dampen its popularity.² Radicalisation has become the buzzword of the post 9/11 era. This is problematic for Australian policymakers for two reasons. First, counterterrorism policy is being developed in reliance on a concept which is the subject of myriad definitions, many of which are not substantiated by robust empirical evidence. Secondly, the focus of radicalisation discourse on extremist ideas can easily lead to the securitisation of minority beliefs and compromise the freedom and plurality that underpin the Australian democratic system.

This article will begin with a discussion of some of the various understandings of radicalisation, which will demonstrate that there is no agreement as to what a radicalised individual looks like. It will then examine the underlying assumption of the radicalisation discourse that ideas lead to violence, given that recent research has suggested that it may in fact be the desire to engage in violence that leads to extreme ideas and not the other

¹ PerthNow, 'Melbourne Terror Attack: Radical Islam Greatest National Security Threat, Says Scott Morrison', 10 November 2018, <www.perthnow.com.au/news/terrorism/melbourne-terror-attack-radical-islam-greatest-national-security-threat-says-prime-minister-scott-morrison-ng-b881017869z> [Accessed 20 February 2019].

² Alex P. Schmid, 'Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review', *ICCT Research Paper* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2013), p. 1.

way around. The article will continue with an analysis of the alienation-radicalisation hypothesis, and show that some studies have found that it is not isolation or marginalisation but strong social ties that are a precondition for violent activism. It will then be argued that even the least controversial aspect of radicalisation, the fact that it is a process, is the subject of so much debate that it provides very little assistance to policymakers or law enforcement. It will conclude by arguing that Australia needs a broader counterterrorism research agenda that encompasses interdisciplinary methods of understanding the complexities of violent extremism.

What is Radicalisation?

While definitions vary, radicalisation is broadly understood as a process through which an individual comes to accept a worldview that is contrary to mainstream thought, and may support the use of violence to realise his or her ideas. Prior to 2001 the term radicalisation was a reasonably obscure academic term that was rarely used in the media. It came into popular usage after the 2005 London bombings and the murder of Theo van Gogh.³ These events shifted public perception of Islamic terrorism. Previously it had been perceived as a purely external threat. The revelation that the perpetrators of the London bombing were British residents who had been raised in a liberal democratic state raised the spectre of a new kind of threat, that of 'homegrown terrorism', and the notion that residents of peaceful Western nations could become terrorists through exposure to radical ideas.⁴

The term radicalisation is frequently used to describe a kind of process through which individuals come to accept the use of extreme means to pursue their objectives. At its most basic, radicalisation has been defined as a process by which people become extremists.⁵ A pamphlet entitled 'Living Safe Together', produced as part of an Australian Government counterterrorism initiative explained that when a person's beliefs "move from being relatively conventional to being radical, and they want drastic change in society, this is known as radicalisation".⁶ This definition is similar to that proposed by Tarik Fraihi, who called radicalisation "a process in which an individual's convictions and willingness to seek deep and serious changes in society increase".⁷ Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen defined it as "a growing readiness

³ Mark Sedgwick, 'The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2010), p. 480.

⁴ Manni Crone, 'Radicalisation Revisited: Violence, Politics and the Skills of the Body', *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 3 (2016), p. 589.

⁵ Peter R. Neumann, 'The Trouble with Radicalisation', *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 4 (2013), p. 874.

⁶ Attorney-General's Department, *Living Safe Together* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2016) <www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/informationadvice/Documents/preventing-violent-extremism-and-radicalisation-in-australia.pdf> [Accessed 27 March 2017].

⁷ Tarik Fraihi, '(De-)Escalating Radicalisation: The Debate within Immigrant Communities in Europe', in Rik Coolsaet (ed.), *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge: European and American Experiences* (Surry and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), p. 210.

to pursue and support far-reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose a direct threat to, the existing order".⁸ The problem with such broad definitions is that while they may be well-suited to the dynamic nature of terrorism, in effect they merely describe an increased commitment to unspecified ideas which may be benign and even transitory.

Many definitions of radicalisation do include an acceptance of violence as an essential characteristic. A recent report for the European Commission defined it as a process whereby an individual becomes "more revolutionary, militant or extremist, especially where there is an intent towards or support for violence".⁹ Wilber and Dubouloz proposed that radicalisation is a personal or interpersonal process by which an individual adopts extreme political, social and/or political ideas that justify the use of indiscriminate violence for attainment of their goals.¹⁰ These definitions distinguish violent radicalism from other forms of extremism, such as religious fundamentalism, environmentalism or survivalism.

One of the most fundamental divides in the Australian radicalisation debate is between advocates of cognitive and of behavioural radicalisation. Peter Neumann defended the validity of the term radicalisation in a 2013 article; however, he admitted that it is an ambiguous concept which needs to be clarified. Neumann ascribed much of the confusion to the fact that there is no consensus as to what the 'end point' of radicalisation should be.¹¹ Many analysts regard radicalisation as a cognitive process through which an individual comes to hold ideas about society and governance that are commonly regarded as extreme. Thus, radicalisation is an attitudinal/emotional phenomenon which can, in certain circumstances, lead to acts of terrorism.¹² Others, however, believe that radicalisation should be characterised by the actions individuals undertake to realise these ideas. Therefore, 'violent radicalisation' is the process through which a person prepares to take actions to realise his or her radical worldview.¹³

The problem with the cognitive approach is that radical thought is measured against mainstream opinion. This poses the risk of criminalising legitimate

⁸ Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, 'Violent Radicalisation in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2010), p. 798.

⁹ Rizat Butt and Henry Tuck, *European Counter-Radicalisation and De-radicalisation: A Comparative Evaluation of Approaches in the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Germany* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2014), p. 2.

¹⁰ Alex S Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz, 'Transformative Radicalization: Applying Learning Theory to Islamist Radicalization', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 34, no. 5 (2011), p. 418.

¹¹ Neumann, 'The Trouble with Radicalisation', p. 875.

¹² Jean-Luc Marret, Allard R. Feddes, Liesbeth Mann, Bertjan Doosje and Heather Griffioen-Young, 'An Overview of the SAFIRE Project: A Scientific Approach to Finding Indicators and Responses to Radicalisation', *Journal EXIT-Deutschland: Zeitschrift für Deradikalisierung und demokratische Kultur*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2013), p. 125.

¹³ Manni Crone, 'Religion and Violence: Governing Muslim Militancy through Aesthetic Assemblages', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2014), p. 295.

political opinions that are merely different from normative social thinking. In a recent report commissioned by the Department of Defence it was argued that there is a real danger that cognitive radicalisation can delegitimise minority views. The report observed that cognitive definitions of radicalisation merely state that a person is “radicalised because they have radical ideas and therefore are radicals”. Not only does this do little to advance the debate about the causes of terrorism, it can result in the securitisation of views which do nothing more than run counter to societies’ norms.¹⁴ Michele Grippo has posited that the reason for the controversy around the concept of radicalisation is that societal attitudes about what is ‘radical’ change throughout history. Radicalism is a relative concept, which is dependent on social and historical context.¹⁵ Thus, the legitimacy of an idea or belief is only assessed in relation to the mainstream belief structures of a particular time and place.

Therefore, radicalism is an essentially relative concept which will constantly shift as conventional thinking changes. Sedgwick observed that radical views are typically regarded as those which are positions at the extremity of a continuum of organised thought. Thus, radicalisation can be understood as the process of moving up the continuum. The uncertainty regarding the point at which ideas cross over into extremism provides little comfort to the minority communities. Victoria Sentas, in her analysis of the social effects of Australian counterterrorism law, found that in Victoria “Muslims are largely positioned as the subjects of future dangerousness, and responsible for preventing terrorism through ‘civic participation’, including interaction with state agencies and programs”.¹⁶ Australian Muslims have been encouraged to practice ‘moderate’ Islam through programs such as the 2005 Muslim Summit and the 2006 National Action Plan Against Extremism.¹⁷ Australian politicians constantly reassure Muslim populations that they recognise the difference between legitimate Islamic doctrines and the distorted teachings of militant clerics; their inability to specify which ideas are the ones which inspire violence has led many to believe that the War on Terror is in fact a war on Islam.¹⁸ Such sentiments were recorded in a recent analysis of Muslim Sydneysiders’ responses to online campaigns designed to counter violent extremism. Some respondents found certain government-sponsored

¹⁴ Minerva Nasser-Eddine, Bridget Garnham, Katerina Agostino and Gilbert Caluya, *Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Literature Review* (Canberra: Australian Government, Department of Defence, March 2011), pp. 13-15.

¹⁵ Michele Grippo, ‘An Empirical Analysis of Causes of Islamist Radicalisation: Italian Case Study’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2017).

¹⁶ Victoria Sentas, *Traces of Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁸ Randy Borum, ‘Radicalisation into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories’, *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2011), p. 10.

resources to perpetuate negative stereotypes of Muslims and appeared to suggest that terrorism was a predominantly Islamic phenomenon.¹⁹

A New Kind of Threat?

When a new word is brought into popular usage it is typically to describe a phenomenon which the existing vocabulary is unable to adequately capture. The surge in the popularity of the term radicalisation in popular, academic and policy discourse reflects the widespread perception that these attacks were the result of a dramatically new kind of threat. These homegrown, or “self-starter” terrorists, as Aidan Kirby described them, did not rely on formal recruitment structures or initiation for their ideological grooming.²⁰ This new type of terrorist was seen as a product of the Internet age, able to access materials and online communities that facilitated their deadly designs.²¹

However, it is not entirely clear how the terrorists of the post 9/11 era are different to the terrorists who have come before. Andrew Silke has observed that terrorism has a long and complex history which is often overlooked by those who choose to view the Age of Terror as a product of the modern world.²² Some who believe that the terrorists of today are qualitatively different to those of previous centuries argue that the terrorists of the past had hierarchical command structures and organised recruitment methods.²³ However, this argument ignores anarchist terrorism of the late 1800s which encouraged lone actor attacks because of their ideological opposition to hierarchical order.²⁴ This understanding of terrorism further overlooks foreign fighters who organised themselves to travel to the Greek War of Independence and the Spanish Civil War without the assistance of any official network.²⁵ It also fails to take into account certain twentieth-century European terrorist organisations which relied on the actions of self-starter operatives, like the Basque separatist group Euskal Ta Askatasuna (ETA), which operated in Spain between 1959 and 2018. Much like contemporary Islamist organisations, ETA also published and distributed propaganda materials such as their magazine *Zutik*, which were designed to mobilise disaffected Basques and direct them against approved targets.

¹⁹ Roslyn Richardson, 'Fighting Fire with Fire: Target Audience Responses to Online Anti-Violence Campaigns' (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), 2013), pp. 30-31.

²⁰ Aidan Kirby, 'The London Bombers as "Self-Starters": A Case Study in Indigenous Radicalisation and the Emergence of Autonomous Cliques', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 30, no. 5 (2007), pp. 415-16.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 426.

²² Andrew Silke, 'Honour and Expulsion: Terrorism in Nineteenth-Century Japan', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 9, no. 4 (1997), pp. 58-59.

²³ Peter R. Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p. 17.

²⁴ Richard Bach Jensen, 'Historical Lessons: An Overview of Early Anarchism and Lone Actor Terrorism', in Michael Fredhold (ed.), *Understanding Lone Actor Terrorism* (Abingdon and New York: Rutledge, 2016), pp. 30-31.

²⁵ Elizabeth Roberts, *'Freedom, Faction, Fame and Blood': British Soldiers of Conscience in Greece, Spain and Finland* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), pp. 86-87.

Religious terrorism is typically understood as being fundamentally different to secular terrorism because it is motivated by transcendent, utopian, even eschatological views rather than limited social and political objectives. Thus, it has been argued that Islamic terrorists are not 'mere' radicals, but the vanguard of a millenarian movement with ambitions for global dominance.²⁶ However, it is easy to overstate the difference between religion and ideology. Many of the young Communists of the interwar period held their views with a fervour that could only be compared with religious zeal. For many young people of the time, who had lived through World War One and the Great Depression, Communism took the place of the religion of their parents and allowed them to forge a separate identity.²⁷ Nationalism can become a quasi-religion for identity groups who desire to create a utopian homeland. Equally, religion can serve an instrumental purpose to young Muslims seeks to rebel against secularism.²⁸ Therefore, the operative question is not what views these people are hold, but what purpose the views serve in their lives.

Perhaps the most difficult theoretical challenge for the radicalisation regime is how to explain the mechanics by which ideas lead to physical violence. Manni Crone has argued that the problem with cognitive radicalisation is that it intellectualises action. Crone argues that ideas rarely instigate violence but are more commonly used as ex post rationalisation of violent acts. People who choose to engage in violence produce the necessary worldview to justify their actions.²⁹ Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen drew similar conclusions in her study of *jihadi* counterculture. Her study also revealed that the notoriety of jihadism attracts recruits who are seeking action and adventure.³⁰ These studies could provide an explanation for the fact that many jihadists have only a limited understanding of Islamic doctrines, or have adopted what Rik Coolsaet has referred to as "cut and paste Islam".³¹ Of course, the fact that ideology may not be a primary motivating factor in all cases does not mean that it does not play an important role in the mobilisation process. The philosophical justification for political violence is crucial to its legitimisation. Thus, counter narratives are still a useful tool in

²⁶ Jeroen Gunning and Richard Jackson, 'What's So 'Religious' about 'Religious Terrorism'?', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2011), p. 371.

²⁷ Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury Recalled* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 14; James K. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 34.

²⁸ Frazer Egerton, 'Alienation and Its Discontents', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 17, no. 3 (2010), pp. 459-60.

²⁹ Manni Crone, 'Religion and Violence: Governing Muslim Militancy through Aesthetic Assemblages', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2014), p. 296-97.

³⁰ Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen, 'Viewing Jihadism as a Counterculture: Potential and Limitations', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2015), p. 12.

³¹ Rik Coolsaet, 'The Rise and Demise of Jihadi Terrorism in Belgium', in Rik Coolsaet (ed.), *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge: European and American Experiences* (Surry and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), p. 169.

countering violent extremism, though even their most fervent advocates would not view them as a panacea.³²

Schmid has observed that in spite of the surge in interest in radicalisation little attention has been paid to the actual experiences of current and former terrorists, as recounted in their own words.³³ Terrorist memoirs and interviews often show that even those engaged in deeply ideological struggles enlisted for more personal reasons. One example is that of Iñaki Rekarte, who was convicted of killing three people in a bomb attack while he was a member of ETA. Rekarte later regretted his actions, stating that he had joined the terrorist group because his best friend encouraged him to sign up and he thought it would be fun to play with guns.³⁴ Another, Kepa Pikabea Uganda, who went on to become a leader in the organisation, recalled that as a child he had witnessed the hero's welcome that ETA members who were freed under the amnesty laws of the 1970s received when they returned to his village. He admitted that he joined the movement to overcome the insecurity that he had felt over his humble upbringing on a rural farm.³⁵

The variety of motives that current and former terrorist operatives ascribe to their decision to mobilise throw doubt on the notion that it is necessarily, or even primarily, radical ideas that lead to violence. Indeed, Manni Crone has inverted the relationship between ideas and violence by examining whether a prior acquaintance with violence is in fact a precondition for adopting extremist ideologies. Crone conducted an analysis of the individuals who perpetrated terror attacks in Europe between January 2012 and January 2015 and found that 80 per cent of them had criminal backgrounds and approximately 60 per cent had been in prison. It is also notable that the perpetrator of the Lindt Cafe Siege in Sydney also had a known criminal background. Crone argues that the question should not be why some people turn to violence, but why they choose to engage in violent acts in the name of an ideology. The answer, she posits, may be the combination of a fascination with war, weapons and violence and a sense of a just cause.³⁶ Rather than being brainwashed by radicalisers, these people may in fact seek out role models who have prior experience with terrorism.³⁷

The debate over the religion-violence nexus has important implications for Australian counterterrorism laws. The definition of a terrorist offence under

³² Alex P. Schmid, 'Challenging the Narratives of the "Islamic State"', *ICCT Research Paper* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2015), pp. 2-3.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁴ Iñaki Rekarte, *Lo Dificile es Perdonarse a uno Mismo* (Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 2015).

³⁵ Mónica Ceberio Belaza, 'Dos condenados "al final del túnel"', *El País*, 24 October 2011, <elpais.com/politica/2011/10/24/actualidad/1319487016_248095.html> [Accessed 19 February 2019].

³⁶ Crone, 'Radicalisation Revisited', p. 594.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 600.

section 100.1 of the *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) requires an action be done or a threat made “with the intention of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause”. This definition includes motive as a fault element of terrorism offences, which is a significant expansion of substantive criminal law.³⁸ Phillip Ruddock defended these legislative changes by reasoning that these new offence address “the combination of violent destruction and politics or ideological motivation that is unique to terrorism ... The underlying motivation of terrorism provides a compelling, nihilistic drive to terrorists that often trumps their value of the perpetrator's own lives”.³⁹ This may well be accurate in certain terrorism cases, however often the motivation is of a much more personal nature. One recent example is that of Sevdet Besim who was convicted in 2016 of planning to attack police officers at the Melbourne Anzac Day celebrations. Although there was substantial evidence of his engagement with radical ideas, it was found that Besim was largely motivated to plan this attack because his best friend, Numan Haider, had recently been shot dead by police. The trial judge held that it was the death of his friend which led to Besim’s “profound alienation from mainstream society”.⁴⁰

In Australia, the fact that an offence is prosecuted under terrorism laws, as opposed to the general criminal law, has important consequences for sentencing. Not only are sentences for terrorism offences significantly higher, with view to deterrence, but under section 19AG of the *Crimes Act 1914* (Cth) the non-parole period must constitute a minimum of three-quarters of the head sentence. In the years since Faheem Khalid Lodhi became the first person to be convicted under Australia’s new counterterrorism laws the majority of persons who have been found guilty under these law have been Muslim men.⁴¹ Sameer Ahmed has raised concerns about the application of anti-terror laws in the United States, which he found to disproportionately target young Muslim men on the grounds that they are “uniquely dangerous: because they cannot be deterred or rehabilitated”.⁴² One concerning aspect of the radicalisation debate is a tendency to depict individuals who engage in or aspire to terrorism as fundamental different to other types of criminals. This notion could lead to more punitive responses and a greater acceptance of preventive and even indefinite incarceration.

³⁸ Bernadette McSherry, ‘The Introduction of Terrorism-Related Offences in Australia: Comfort or Concern?’, *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2005), p. 282.

³⁹ Phillip Ruddock, ‘Law as a Preventative Weapon Against Terrorism’, in Andrew Lynch, Edwina MacDonald and George Williams (eds.), *Law and Liberty in the War on Terror* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2007), p. 5.

⁴⁰ *The Queen v Besim* [2016] VSC 537 (Croucher J), [146].

⁴¹ Nicola McGaritty, ‘Let the Punishment Match the Offence: Determining Sentences for Australian Terrorists’, *International Journal for Crime and Justice*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2013), pp. 18-19.

⁴² Sameer Ahmed, ‘Is History Repeating Itself? Sentencing Young American Muslims in the War on Terror’, *The Yale Law Journal*, vol. 126, no. 5 (2017), p. 1525.

Alienation and Radicalisation

The concept of radicalisation emphasises an individual journey towards extremism, and as a result, much attention has been paid to personal circumstances which could function as indicators for potential radicals.⁴³ The consequences of terror attacks are so devastating that one could easily assume that they must be the product of a deviant or disturbed mind. However, attempts at creating a psychological profile for actual or potential radicals have been unsuccessful.⁴⁴ Studies that have examined demographic or socioeconomic factors for radicalisation have also failed to identify effective predictors for violent extremism.⁴⁵ Analyses have shown that young males are more likely than any other demographics to engage in political violence, a fact which appears to be appreciated by the Islamic State. Sharyn Rundle-Thiele and Renata Anibaldi conducted an analysis of IS propaganda and found it to be directed primarily at twenty- to thirty-year-olds.⁴⁶ This information, however, is insufficient to guide policymakers and experts who are seeking to design and implement counter-radicalisation programs. Poverty does not appear to lead to radicalisation in and of itself, yet some work has demonstrated that under-employment may be a motive for joining a terrorist organisation. As Schmid has observed, the poor are often too concerned with survival to be receptive to ideologies. However, they may join an extremist group to partake of the benefits offered to members.⁴⁷

Studies that have examined social and psychological factors which could predispose an individual to extremism have given rise to numerous hypotheses. One such is that radicalisation is a consequence of an identity crisis of Muslim youths in the West. Second or third generation Muslims may find themselves disconnected from the country of their parents or grandparents, and yet not wholly belonging to their nation of residence due to discrimination and/or socioeconomic disadvantage. This marginalisation, it is proposed, may render them vulnerable to the lure of a community and ideological framework through which they can express their sense of injustice.⁴⁸ A recent study by Angela McGilloway, Priyo Gosh and Kamaldeep Bhui highlighted the importance of identity in radicalisation. It

⁴³ Michele Groppi, 'An Empirical Analysis of Causes of Islamist Radicalisation: Italian Case Study', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2017).

⁴⁴ Schmid, 'Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation', p. 21.

⁴⁵ Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, 'The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 38, no. 11 (2015), p. 959; Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 48.

⁴⁶ Sharyn Rundle-Thiele and Renata Anibaldi, 'Countering Violent Extremism: From Defence to Attack', *Security Challenges*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2016), p. 53.

⁴⁷ Angela McGilloway, Priyo Gosh and Kamaldeep Bhui, 'A Systematic Review of Pathways to and Processes Associated with Radicalisation and Extremism amongst Muslims in Western societies', *International Review of Psychiatry*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2015), p. 40.

⁴⁸ Nasser-Eddine et. al., *Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Literature Review*, pp. 14-15.

found issues of identity to be a dominant theme in qualitative studies of individuals who had been affiliated with extremist organisations. This took different forms, including religious practice and the adoption of culturally specific attire. External markers of religious or ethnic identity can enable an individual to both demonstrate membership of an identity group and to emphasise his or her opposition to mainstream society.⁴⁹

Social isolation has also been shown to lead to radicalisation in some cases. The recent case of *The Queen v MHK* detailed the personal circumstances of a Melbourne youth from a Syrian immigrant family who was convicted for attempting to create explosive devices for the use in a terrorist attack. The judgment stated that the young man known as MHK suffered from social anxiety and depression at school which led to him to seek out information about his country and faith. However, in addition to his social problems, one of the key causes of his radicalisation was viewing videos of atrocities committed against his fellow Sunni Muslims. This caused him to view the Islamic State as the defender of his kinsmen.⁵⁰

The idea that social alienation and discrimination are a precondition for radicalisation has a substantial influence over Australian counterterrorism policy. The Attorney-General's Department has stated that a primary objective of its countering violent extremism program is "to prevent radicalisation from emerging as an issue by addressing the societal drivers that can lead to disengagement and isolation".⁵¹ This goal is premised on the belief that discrimination and disadvantage are preconditions for radicalisation. This argument has many influential advocates, including Oliver Roy, Farah Khosrokhavar, and Coolsaet and Swielande.⁵² One key limitation with this hypothesis is that a substantial proportion of the world's population experiences some form of discrimination or disadvantage, yet only a very small percentage of people seek political change through violence. Schmid has argued that grievances may not be a predictor of extremism, but a mobilising factor.⁵³ While this may not make it any easier for law enforcement personnel to identify individuals who may be susceptible to radical ideas, it does suggest that punitive and disproportionate international and domestic counterterrorism policy could play a role in promoting extremism.

In spite of its popularity, the alienation-radicalisation hypothesis has some theoretical and empirical weaknesses. From a theoretical perspective, one of the issues with this assumption is that the concept of alienation is applied in a broad and inconsistent manner with little attention paid to just how it

⁴⁹ Schmid, 'Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation', p. 40.

⁵⁰ *The Queen v MHK* [2016] VSC 742, [42-44], (Lasry J).

⁵¹ Attorney-General's Department, 'Countering Violent Extremism', <www.ag.gov.au/NationalSecurity/Counteringviolentextremism/Pages/default.aspx> [Accessed 27 March 2017].

⁵² Egerton, 'Alienation and Its Discontents', p. 462.

⁵³ Schmid, 'Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation', p. 26.

serves as a springboard to extremism. From an empirical standpoint, these studies typically lean heavily on anecdotal accounts, autobiographical materials and speculation.⁵⁴ All studies of human motivation suffer from methodological constraints, because the inescapable difficulty is that the inner lives of individuals are not as easily analysed as more tangible phenomena.⁵⁵ However, counterterrorism studies are conducted under a unique disadvantage due to paucity of available data. Scholars have attempted to circumvent these difficulties by using open source information. However, radicalisation literature has been criticised for being particularly weak on empirical studies. Peter Neumann and Scott Kleinmann conducted a review of radicalisation literature, and found that despite a cluster of high-quality research, radicalisation studies are typified by a heavy reliance on secondary sources and questionable qualitative methods, such as opportunistic interviewing.⁵⁶

However, much valuable research has been conducted, and there is a growing body of empirical studies which indicate that people engage in violent political activism because they have strong social networks, and not because they are isolated or marginalised. The work of Marc Sageman and Scott Atran has shown that strong social bonds are a precondition for violent activism.⁵⁷ Similarly, Robert A. Pape has argued that strong social cohesion, and a commitment to the goals of the community provide the necessary support for suicide terrorists.⁵⁸ In a similar vein, Schmid argued that social networks are essential for drawing potential recruits into extremist organisations.⁵⁹ In his recent book on deradicalisation, John Horgan observed that one cannot attempt to understand terrorist involvement without an appreciation for group and organisation dynamics; however, there is still much confusion about how to situate the individual within a multi-level analysis.⁶⁰

Extremist culture is not necessarily found in a formal organisation or in cells of fanatics who are disconnected from mainstream society. Extremist cultures are better understood as loose networks of friends and family which individuals can pass in and out of.⁶¹ This view is supported by Sageman,

⁵⁴ Egerton, 'Alienation and Its Discontents', pp. 463-64.

⁵⁵ Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison, 'Fear No More: Emotions and World Politics', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2008), p. 125.

⁵⁶ Peter Neumann and Scott Kleinmann, 'How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research?', *Democracy and Security*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2013), pp. 360-82.

⁵⁷ Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values, and What It Means to Be Human* (London and New York: Allen Lane, 2010), p. 317; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, p. 84.

⁵⁸ Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 185.

⁵⁹ Schmid, 'Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation', pp. 27-28.

⁶⁰ John Horgan, *Walking away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. xxi.

⁶¹ Crone, 'Revisiting Radicalisation', p. 598.

who found social network analyses to be too rigid to capture the 'fuzziness and fluidity' of extremist communities. Sageman stated that these networks are more like amorphous collections of people or a 'social blob' than a formal organisation.⁶² In her fieldwork on the Danish Muslim community, Hemmingsen found that jihadis are unified by a common culture. Group members perceive themselves as challengers to mainstream society. They are united by a sense that there is something wrong with the status quo, a distrust of those in positions of authority, and a shared vision of utopia.⁶³ Mauricio Florez-Morris found that Colombian guerilla recruits generally led active lifestyles before enlisting, and were involved in diverse social groups including political groups, sporting teams and theatres groups. This made them more likely to come into contact with recruiters. It was also a characteristic that the organisation looked for in potential members, as it decreased the likelihood of infiltration by government security forces.⁶⁴

Researchers are still devising methods to capture the intricacies of extremist networks. Frank Hairgrove and Douglas M. McLeod have argued traditional social movement theory is incapable of properly explaining how individuals join Islamic terror cells.⁶⁵ In their analysis they argued that radicalisation within Islamic groups is a unique phenomenon that cannot be compared with Western movements because of the cultural importance of small religious study groups. Within these groups, participants can undergo a conversion experience that alters their cost benefit analysis.⁶⁶ Yet a similar phenomenon is observable in the Basque Country where small friendship groups—the '*cuadrilla*'—form the basis of social life. These groups are typically formed in childhood and remain constant throughout the lifetimes of their members. The *cuadrilla* has been identified as a key means of induction into the Basque separatist movement. Jerome Ferret examined its importance in *kale borroka*, the politically inspired street violence which took place in the region in late 1990s and early 2000s. In his interviews with former *borrokistas* Ferret found that the *cuadrilla* provided young people with a space in which they could develop their political consciousness and a network which enabled them to mobilise.⁶⁷

⁶² Sageman, 'The Turn to Political Violence in the West', in Rik Coolsaet (ed.) *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge: European and American Experiences* (Surry and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), p. 121.

⁶³ Hemmingsen, 'Viewing Jihadism as a Counterculture', p. 7.

⁶⁴ Mauricio Florez-Morris, 'Joining Guerrilla Groups in Colombia: Individual Motivations and Processes for Entering a Violent Organization', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 30, no. 7 (2007), pp. 624-25.

⁶⁵ Frank Hairgrove and Douglas M. McLeod, 'Circles Drawing Toward High Risk Activism: The Use of Usroh and Halaqa in Islamist Radical Movements', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 31, no. 5 (2008), p. 407.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 408.

⁶⁷ Jerome Ferret, 'Young Radical Nationalists: Prisoners of Their Own Myth? The Case of the Kale Borroka in the Spanish Basque Country', *Current Sociology*, vol. 62 (2014), p. 1024.

Process Work

Scholars generally agree that individuals do not typically turn into extremists overnight, or in response to one isolated trigger.⁶⁸ The literature typically finds that radicalisation takes place over months or even years.⁶⁹ Much of the literature on radicalisation has attempted to conceptualise the radicalisation process. Steps and stairs have been proposed along with pathways, puzzle and pyramids. In an influential report prepared for the New York Police Department, Silber and Bhatt devised a four-stage process, beginning with pre-radicalisation, during which the individual lives his or her ordinary life. This is followed by self-identification, during which period the individual explores Salafi philosophy in response to some kind of personal or political crisis. The individual typically associates with like-minded people, while loosening the bonds with their previous life. The third stage is indoctrination, during which the individual intensifies their new beliefs. The final step, jihadisation, involves an acceptance of the duty to participate in jihad.⁷⁰

This model has been repeated in subsequent reports and numerous studies.⁷¹ Yet, in spite of its popularity, it suffers from various problems. Firstly, it was designed in response to Islamic extremism and overlooks other manifestations of domestic radicalism, such as right-wing extremism and ecoterrorism.⁷² This could be because it is based on the assumption that religious terrorism is a unique and deadly threat which needs a dedicated response.⁷³ In essence, Silber and Bhatt's four steps model is a reformulation of the frustration-aggression hypothesis. Therefore at a theoretical level its main contribution is the four-step structure. However, its description of how individuals move between the different stages is not based upon empirical evidence. Similar criticisms have been made of Moghaddam's staircase model, which illustrates the psychological process leading an individual from sympathiser to perpetrator.⁷⁴

Although Sageman has avoided the term radicalisation in his recent work because of its tendency to confuse, he has proposed a multi-factorial

⁶⁸ Neumann, 'The Trouble with Radicalisation', p. 874.

⁶⁹ Schmid, 'Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation', p. 23.

⁷⁰ Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalisation in the West: The Homegrown Threat* (New York: The New York City Police Department, 2007), pp. 19-44.

⁷¹ Elizabeth Mulcahy, Shannon Merrington and Peter Bell, 'The Radicalisation of Prison Inmates: Exploring Recruitment, Religion and Prisoner Vulnerability', *Journal of Human Security*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2013), pp. 10-11.

⁷² Nasser-Eddine et al., *Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Literature Review*, p. 15.

⁷³ Gunning and Jackson, 'What's so 'Religious' about 'Religious Terrorism'?', p. 371.

⁷⁴ Fathali M. Moghaddam, 'De-radicalization and the Staircase from Terrorism', in David Canter (ed.), *The Faces of Terrorism: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 278-79; Suraj Lakhani, 'Radicalisation as a Moral Career: A Qualitative Study of How People Become Terrorists in the United Kingdom' (PhD Dissertation, Cardiff University, 2013), p. 45.

explanation that includes moral outrage, an enabling ideology, personal experiences of injustice, and mobilising networks.⁷⁵ Sageman's fundamental elements are more in alignment with John Horgan's 'pathways' approach. Horgan has advocated for a rejection of terrorist profiling in favour of an analysis of the processes by which a diverse range of people choose extreme means of pursuing political goals. In spite of his belief in the importance of pathways, Horgan doubts that it will ever be possible to predict with certainty who will and who will not engage in violent political activism. However, he suggests that some form of emotional vulnerability, such as anger or alienation, is a likely precondition, as well as identification with the conflict victims, as occurred in the case of MHK.⁷⁶

The difficulty with paths and staircases, as Hafez and Mullins observed, is that they imply that there are steps towards radical activism that can be taken in an ordered and logical fashion. However, it is precisely the lack of a discernible pattern that is frustrating scholars and policymakers. Instead, Hafez and Mullins proposed a 'puzzle' metaphor to emphasise the gaps in current understandings of radicalisation.⁷⁷ This may be an accurate representation of the state of the research, but its deliberate uncertainty does little to advance the debate. Another methodological issue with process analysis was highlighted by Schmid who noted that the problem with many of these studies is that they have been based on information about individuals who became extremists and have not accounted for the many who may have experienced one or more of the earlier stages but did not progress to radicalism.⁷⁸ These models also fail to account for the cases of individuals who have chosen to engage in political violence without adopting an extreme ideological position, like thrill-seeking Iñaki Rekarte. As Dina Al Raffie found in a recent analysis of Egyptian militant leaders, support for violence is often the result of numerous factors which may have little or nothing to do with ideology.⁷⁹

Future Directions

Radicalisation is generally understood as a process through which an individual internalises extreme ideas. Yet, not only do analysts disagree as to what ideas should be considered radical, they are also unable to determine at what point a person becomes a radical. Sageman has observed that a lot of people say very violent things, but very few follow their

⁷⁵ Sageman, 'The Turn to Political Violence in the West', p. 117.

⁷⁶ John Horgan, 'From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 618, no. 1 (2008), pp. 84-85.

⁷⁷ Hafez and Mullins, 'The Radicalization Puzzle', p. 959.

⁷⁸ Schmid, 'Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation' p. 23.

⁷⁹ Dina Al Raffie, 'Straight from the Horse's Mouth: Explaining Deradicalisation Claims of Former Egyptian Militants', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2015), p. 28.

words up with violent acts.⁸⁰ Yet it is impossible to ignore the fact that extremist ideologies are enticing many people to support and participate in violent political and religious movements. The key to understanding this phenomenon is to encourage empirical research that examines the causal mechanisms through which a person comes to support violent activism. The fundamental challenge to this agenda is how to study the inner life of another human being. The answer may be that more interdisciplinary research is required. Insights from psychology, behavioural economics, anthropology, history and ethnography can help to construct a more nuanced understanding of this internal process.

As Schmid has observed, despite the surge in interest in terrorist motivation insufficient attention is being paid to terrorists' own accounts of their decision-making processes. While first-person recollections may be unreliable, and people often ascribe loftier justifications to their actions than they may in truth have merited, they are still a good place to start.⁸¹ Another approach is to examine the instrumental representations of mental and emotional processes of potential, actual or former terrorists. Narratives, gestures and other forms of communication could provide a fruitful subject for analysis, because they are typically the only exterior manifestations of closely guarded interior processes.⁸² They can also be used to assess the accuracy of first-person accounts. Literary analysis and hermeneutics are uniquely suited to this task. Similarly, art and media criticism can be employed to interpret meaning from aesthetic displays. Bleiker and Hutchison have argued that artistic representations of individual opinions and emotion may provide more accurate data than that which can be gleaned from "habit-prone verbal communication".⁸³ Indeed, Thomas Hegghammer has encouraged more scholars to pay attention to the culture of extremist groups and its influence on recruitment. Hegghammer has stated that the socio-cultural activities of high-risk activists are one of the last major unexplored frontiers of terrorism research, and one that merits an entirely new research program.⁸⁴

Conclusion

This article has questioned the utility of the concept of radicalisation for Australian counterterrorism policy. It has argued that the term is at best confusing, due to conflicting interpretations and limited empirical studies. At worst, the radicalisation discourse poses a dangerous threat to freedom of political discourse by securitising ideas that fall beyond the ambit of mainstream thought. These criticisms do not seek to downplay the threat of

⁸⁰ Sageman, 'The Turn to Political Violence in the West', p. 117.

⁸¹ Schmid, 'Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation', p. 3.

⁸² Bleiker and Hutchison, 'Fear No More', p. 129.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁸⁴ Thomas Hegghammer, 'Why Terrorists Weep: The Socio-Cultural Practices of Jihadi Militants', Paul Wilkinson Memorial Lecture, University of St. Andrews, 16 April 2015, p. 1.

terrorism, which poses a real challenge to Australian policymakers and law enforcement. However, effective threat mitigation requires accurate risk assessment. This in turn relies on rigorous empirical research and analysis that will assist in constructing a more complex and realistic understanding of what causes people to engage in violent political activism.

Nell Bennett is a doctoral candidate with Macquarie University where she is investigating insurgent decision-making. She has a Bachelor of Arts specialising in Counterterrorism Studies, a Master of Research and Diploma in Law. She is also a lawyer and the managing editor of the Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counterterrorism. Her research interests include counterterrorism, counterinsurgency and civil war studies.