Terrorism, radicalization and de-radicalization

Bertjan Doosje[1], Fathali M Moghaddam[2], Arie W Kruglanski[3], Arjan de Wolf[4], Liesbeth Mann[1] and Allard R Feddes[1]

In this article, we review the literature and present a model of radicalization and de-radicalization. In this model, we distinguish three phases in radicalization: (1) a sensitivity phase, (2) a group membership phase and (3) an action phase. We describe the micro-level, meso-level and macro-level factors that influence the radicalization process in these three phases. However, not all people become increasingly radical — they may also de-radicalize. We specify the micro-level, meso-level and macro-level factors in de-radicalization. We highlight the importance of the role of group membership and intergroup relations in the radicalization process.

Addresses
[1] University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[2] Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA
[3] University of Maryland, Washington, USA
[4] Training/Advise De Wolf, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Corresponding author: Doosje, Bertjan (E.J.Doosje@uva.nl)

Introduction

Terrorism[1] is an act of violence (domestic or international), usually committed against non-combatants, and aimed to achieve behavioral change and political objectives by creating fear in a larger population. We argue that group membership plays a crucial role in understanding why people opt for this violence. Indeed, most terrorists' attacks (>95%) are planned and executed in groups [1]. Sporadically, a single person may commit a terrorist attack [2]. Generally, however, terrorism (like other forms of violence, see (AW Kruglanski *et al.*, unpublished data)) is very much a group phenomenon, because in groups, it is easier to prepare an attack and people in groups are more motivated to actually commit the attack, rather than to bail out at the last moment.

The study of terrorism is important because terrorism poses a serious physical threat to the security of citizens and to the Open Society [3]. Indirectly, the induction of fear can have further deleterious effects increasing polarization along ethnic, religious and national lines, promoting conflict among different segments of society.

An important aim of early terrorism research was to find a clear psychological profile of 'the terrorist'. As has been the case with the studies on former high-ranking Nazis [4], it turned out that 'the terrorist' does not deviate from the general population in terms of psychopathology [5,6•]. Thus, terrorists are not 'crazy' and maybe 'there is a terrorist hidden in everyone' [7].

In this review, as a consequence of the failure to find a clear terrorist profile, we start with examining the role of radicalization as a process that might lead to terrorism. We then focus on the idea that although it is possible to distinguish different types of radical groups, these groups do share relevant characteristics. In the present article, we distinguish and discuss three phases of radicalization: (1) Sensitivity; (2) Group membership; and (3) Action. Not all people become increasingly radical–they may also de-radicalize.

Radicalization

Radicalization is a process through which people become increasingly motivated to use violent means against members of an out-group or symbolic targets to achieve behavioral change and political goals. In Figure 1, we outline a model of radicalization (and de-radicalization). Inspired by the 'staircase model to terrorism' [8•], this model distinguishes three phases. Phase 1 is characterized by a sensitivity to a radical ideology. In Phase 2, an individual becomes a member of a radical group. Finally, in Phase 3, this person is ready to act on behalf of the group's ideology, for example by planning an attack.

There are 5 types of radical groups that can be distinguished. In Table 1 we describe these types and indicate what their main concerns are.

Characteristics of radical groups

The different types of radical groups share common elements [9,10•]. First, all radical groups perceive a serious problem in society. This problem or grievance is

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[1] We realize that terrorism is a politically motivated term. One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. In addition, in some cases, in people's perceptions, a 'terrorist' can be transformed in a 'freedom fighter' (e.g., Nelson Mandela).

Figure 1
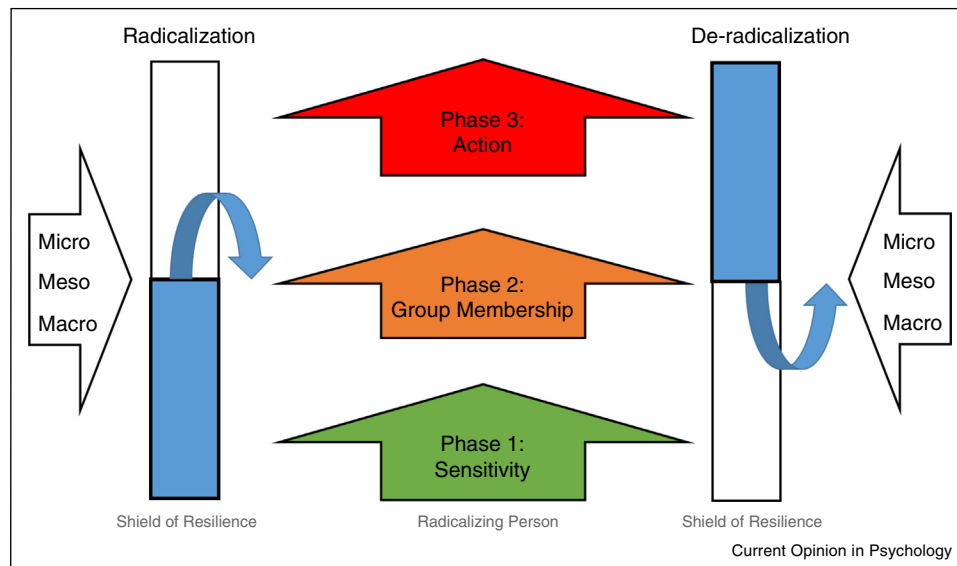
The (de)radicalization process and its determinants. From Doosje, De Wolf, Mann and Feddes [18].

different for each radical group — see Table 1 for examples.

Second, radical groups are strongly dissatisfied with the manner in which the current institutions (particularly police/politicians) deal with their problem. They may argue that the institutions do not pay enough attention to their grievance, or they may think that the institutions do not do enough to handle their grievance [8•]. This creates a low institutional trust and a perception that authorities are not legitimate [11•].

An important third characteristic of radical groups is that they consider their own group's norms and values as superior to those of other groups. This creates a strong us versus them distinction, which might form the foundation of the use of violence [12].

The fourth characteristic of radical groups is particularly important: most such groups embrace an ideology that legitimizes violence to address their concerns, and this violence is often directed at an out-group viewed as the culprit responsible for creating the grievance. This is most clearly articulated in the application of social identity theory to radicalization [13], in which identification with the in-group combined with dis-identification with the out-group are related to the use of violence against out-group members.

Table 1

Different types of radical groups, their main concern and examples.

Type	Main concern	Examples
1. Nationalistic or Separatist Groups	Secure a territory for the own group	ETA (Spain), IRA (Ireland), Palestine/Israel, PKK (Turkey), Tamil Tigers (Sri Lanka), ISIS (Syria & Iraq)
2. Extreme Right-Wing Groups	To safe-guard the high status position of the 'white race' that is perceived to be threatened by immigrants	Klu Klux Klan (U.S.), Pegida (Germany)
3. Extreme Left-Wing Groups	Achieve a just distribution of wealth and perceive capitalism as the main source of evil	FARC (Colombia), Baader-Meinhof Group/'Red Army Fraction' (Germany), the Red Brigade (Italy), the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party–Front' (Turkey)
4. Single Issue Groups	Their main concern focuses on one particular topic (not an extensive ideology), such as the environment, animal rights or abortion	'Earth Liberation Front' (U.K.), 'Animal Liberation Front' (several countries), 'Army of God' (Anti-Abortion, U.S.)
5. Religiously motivated Groups	They adhere to a very strict interpretation of their religion to justify violence against 'infidels'	ISIS (Syria/& Iraq), Al Qaida (several countries), 'Army of God' (U.S.)

Relatedly, the fifth characteristic of radical groups is the strong belief in the efficacy of the use of violence. Consequently, radical groups are often inclined to approve of the violence committed by their members as the most effective means to achieve their ideological ends.

A model of radicalization and de-radicalization

Most terrorists are not mentally ill. Rather, terrorism is a result of a radicalization process in steps that can happen to 'normal' people [8[●],14] (see Figure 1). The radicalizing person forms the central element in our model. As indicated earlier, this person follows three phases during the radicalization process: (1) sensitivity phase, (2) the group membership phase and (3) the action phase. Whether or not this person will follow all the phases depends on factors at three levels (AR Feddes *et al.*, unpublished data): micro (individual), meso (group) and macro (societal) level. At all three levels, however, this person may be protected against radical influences by a shield of resilience [15]. Half way the group membership phase, the shield of resilience turns around. The radical group is making the person resilient against de-radicalization influences from outside the group [16].

Phase 1 of radicalization: sensitivity

At the first level, the *micro* level, factors within the person that may influence this process. In the sensitivity phase, an important driving factor at the *micro* level concerns the quest for significance [17[●],18]. Feelings of insignificance can be caused by a loss of status, a strong sense of humiliation, or poor career prospects (personal failure, criminal activities, and drug abuse). Radical groups such as ISIS are well-equipped to foster or restore feelings of significance by providing recruits with a sense of belonging, respect, heroism, status and the notion to fight for a holy cause.

A second important driving factor at the *micro* level is personal uncertainty. When people feel uncertain, they become motivated to identify strongly with a group that reduces their uncertainty by providing them with clear norms and values [19]. Radical groups are particularly able to do this, as they have a clear profile, offer a solid structure and a black-and-white world view. Thus, orthodox groups, such as Jihadi groups, with well-developed behavioral rules can be attractive for people who experience personal uncertainty.

At the *meso* level, the radicalization process is likely to depend on the social environment (friends, family, and other groups). An important driving factor at this meso level is *fraternal relative deprivation*, the feeling of injustice that people experience when they identify with their group and perceive that their group has been treated worse than another group [20]. For example, Muslims in Europe experience this in terms of housing, education opportunities, work and income [21–23]. In addition, they experience discrimination and the use of double standards from the media [24[●]]. Similarly, right wing groups experience that native citizens are being treated worse than immigrants [12].

Another important factor at this meso level concerns friendship and family. People are social beings and this makes them vulnerable to social influence from people close to them and with whom they have frequent contact. This is true for Jihadi warriors as well [25]. Extremist groups supply individuals with a strong sense of in-group belongingness, which is a basic human need [26], and a clear image of an evil out-group, creating a strong inter-group dynamic [27].

Finally, at the *macro* level, the process of radicalization is partly influenced by the larger societal factors [3]. For example, accelerating globalization and the world-wide threat due to the political, economic and cultural dominance of the West forms an important driving factor for radical Muslims. They experience the Western life style as a cultural threat to the pure Islam and the wars by the West pose a threat to the larger Muslim community ('Ummah'; [28,29]). In this sense, globalization 'spurs terrorism' [30,31].

Phase 2 of radicalization: group membership

In the second phase, the individual with a 'cognitive opening' joins a radical group. Mutual commitment is central in this process. The individual feels attached or fused with the group, and the group is fused with the individual. At the *micro* level, a person starts as a marginal member, and is motivated to show the loyalty to the group. As such, this person is likely to follow the norms and values of the group, for example by downgrading an out-group in public contexts [32[●]].

The *meso* level is of great importance, as during this phase, ties between the individual and the group are strengthened. This can be achieved via initiation rituals. In addition, physical and psychological isolation can cut people loose from their old social environment. Finally, training and coaching form important elements of this phase [33]. Importantly, in this phase group members are often encouraged to 'break bridges' with friends and family who do not belong to the group. This makes the in-group cohesive and strong [34[●]]. This is of course not necessary when people feel supported in their radical beliefs and actions by their social environment [35].

At the *macro* level, the declaration of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq possibly has increased levels of perceived group efficacy. It has demonstrated that it is possible for Muslims to challenge Western influence and create a Caliphate in the Middle East, a long term dream of

Muslim extremists. This has led to a great influx of more than 20,000 foreign fighters to ISIS controlled areas.

Phase 3 of radicalization: action

In this final phase, people turn to using violence against other groups. Though it may not be psychologically easy for people to commit violence, a driving factor at the *micro* level often is the confrontation with death of a relative or friend [36•]. This has for example been documented for the 'Black widows' in Chechnya, whose husbands had died in the conflict with Russia [37].

At the *meso* level, an important strategy mentioned earlier to prepare for the use of violence (with the possibility of dying in action), is to have individuals write or videotape a testament. The idea is that once people have made this step, it makes it harder for them to withdraw [38]. In addition, by stressing the non-human aspects of the out-group (comparing them with vermin such as rats or cockroaches [39]; Haslam and Stratemeyer, this issue), in combination with presenting the out-group as an acute threat to the in-group, people justify their violence toward that out-group. At the *macro* level, appeals by authorities to use violence play an important role [28].

De-radicalization

As outlined in Figure 1, members of radical groups have a shield of resilience, which makes them less likely to be persuaded by anti-radical messages from outside their group. In some cases, however, this shield may fall apart allowing de-radicalization to start. De-radicalization is a process in which people reject the ideology they once embraced. This is one step further than disengagement, which is characterized by a change in behavior (stop using violence and leaving the radical group) without giving up one's radical beliefs [40,41•]. Often, de-radicalization (i.e., rejecting the ideology) occurs when people's commitment to the group decreases.

A factor at the *micro* level can be the loss of the ideological appeal. By experiencing other major life events (marriage, birth of a child — which may strengthen other group ties), the radical group may offer less significance and meaning. Another factor is intellectual doubt ('Do I want to live my life like this forever?'), which sometimes is heightened by exposure to alternative viewpoints, such as through relevant books and media, but it may also be supported by other group members, making it a *meso* factor. An important element at the *meso* level is detachment from the group and its activities, sometimes caused by an intra-group conflict and disappointment in the (leaders of the) group [42]. At the *macro* level, prison can sometimes create a context in which people want to make a new start and de-radicalize [43].

Not only individuals can leave radical groups, such groups can themselves disintegrate and stop existing. Between 1970 and 2007, 63% of terrorist groups ceased to exist [44]. This can be achieved in five manners [45]: (1) splintering (33.7%); (2) political solution (28.5%); (3) actions by police and intelligence services (26.5%); (4) winning by achieving their goals (6.7%) and (5) military intervention (4.7%). Both splintering and political solution involve changes in the (inter)group dynamics. Specifically, while splintering in radical groups occurs (by definition) as a result of intra-group frictions and disagreements, political solutions occur due to a change in the intergroup political landscape.

Conclusions

In this article, we have outlined how factors at the micro (individual), meso (group) and macro (society) level can play a role in a process of radicalization and de-radicalization [46,47]. We argue that it is crucial to take into account group membership and the inter-group context that forms the basis of radicalization. Every radical group is characterized by a strong sense of a (superior) in-group identity, as well as an (inferior and evil) out-group, which is held as responsible for the grievance of the in-group and as such is perceived as a legitimate target of violent attacks in order to achieve societal and political changes.

Importantly, people are able to resist the temptations of a radical ideology to the extent that they have a strong shield of resilience. Interestingly, a shield of resilience may also make people — once they belong to a radical group — less susceptible to attempts at de-radicalization.

Thus, we argue that it is not possible to understand radicalization without taking into account the group-level psychological processes in terms of belonging, social influence and polarization. This account does not justify the illegal and violent behavior of radical groups — it just makes them more (psycho-) logical.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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