
Comparing Theories of Radicalisation with Countering Violent Extremism Policy

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Abstract

This article assesses whether the scholarly literature on radicalisation is adequately integrated into national policy strategies for countering violent extremism (CVE). It outlines concepts and models of radicalisation, and offers a framework for understanding its various complex causes. The article then compares this scholarly research against case studies of CVE policy from the United Kingdom, Australia, Denmark, Sweden and The Netherlands. These countries' policies adequately capture the core nature of radicalisation, but otherwise exhibit significant variation in how they explain its causes. This can be explained partly by a lack of clarity over how and why radicalisation happens. However, it also suggests that CVE policy is often shaped less by evidence-based research, and more by cultural, political and historical factors. This confirms a need for evidence-based approaches to CVE, and for deeper comparative studies of how radicalisation is understood across national contexts.

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I. Introduction

There are many different explanations as to what radicalisation is and how and why people radicalise. At its core, radicalisation is a process in which a person adopts extremist views and moves towards committing a violent act. Models describing the *process* of radicalisation differ on how many steps or stages are involved in the progression towards violence (Gill, 2007; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Moghaddam, 2005; Sageman, 2007, 2004; Taarnby, 2005). Common metaphors describe it as a 'staircase' (Moghaddam, 2005) or 'pathway' (Gill,

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2007) to terrorism, though scholars are increasingly moving away from linear models (Jensen, Atwell Seate, & James, 2018; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Wilner & Dubouloz, 2010).

The *causes* of radicalisation are typically explained through a variety of perspectives that emphasise psychological, economic and other factors (Christmann, 2012; Hafez and Mullins, 2015; Maskaliūnaitė, 2015; Senzai, 2015). A growing number of empirical studies test the relevance of these factors by drawing on strain theory, social movement theory and other frameworks (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010, 2008a; LaFree, Jensen, James & Safer-Lichtenstein, 2018; Nivette, Eisner & Ribeaud, 2017; Pederson, Vestel, & Bakken, 2018). Radicalisation remains a complex field, with no single profile for identifying who is likely to radicalise, or when they will progress to committing a violent act (Borum, 2015; Desmarais et al., 2017; Horgan, 2008, 2014; Silke, 1998).

The complexity of these reasons makes it difficult for governments to design appropriate policy responses to terrorism. Strategies for countering violent extremism (CVE) have become a core component of national counter-terrorism policy. These national policy documents shape CVE programs on the ground, which involve police working with communities, health services, government agencies and private companies (Beutel & Weinberger, 2016) to address the risks of extremism and radicalisation. CVE programs include efforts to address radicalisation directly through prison deradicalisation programs and multi-agency interventions for youth at risk of radicalisation. Many CVE programs also include primary prevention efforts directed at a wider population (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle & Zammit, 2016).

This article begins by assessing the current state of the literature on radicalisation. Radicalisation research is constantly developing, so it is useful to periodically take stock of the field. Part Two analyses different concepts and models of radicalisation, including its relationship to extremism. Part Three offers a framework for understanding the complex causes involved in this process. These causes are grouped into ideological, psychological, social, political, economic and technological factors. Part Three assesses briefly the weight of the available evidence as to how important these factors are in causing radicalisation.

Part Four explains the data sources and methods, and Part Five assesses the extent to which the scholarly research is integrated in Western CVE policy strategies. Part Five draws on case studies from the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Denmark, Sweden and The Netherlands. It is based in a qualitative content analysis of national CVE and counter-terrorism policy documents.

The main contribution of this article is to marry radicalisation research with an analysis of CVE policy. It offers a framework for understanding the causes of radicalisation which can be used to assess which explanation governments favour in their respective CVE policies. This contributes to deeper comparative analysis of national approaches to CVE.

The article also aims to contribute to greater consistency in how governments understand radicalisation, and a greater reliance on evidence-based approaches. While people radicalise for complex and diverse reasons, there should not be any significant inconsistencies in how governments understand and model that process. Western governments should also maintain compatible explanations of radicalisation so that they can cooperate effectively when countering that threat across national borders.

The following analysis demonstrates that CVE policies adequately capture the core nature of radicalisation, but otherwise exhibit significant variation in how they explain its causes. This is partly due to ongoing uncertainty over what radicalisation is and how it should be modelled. However, it also suggests that CVE policy is often shaped less by evidence-based research, and more so by political, cultural and historical factors that are specific to each national government. This suggests a need for greater consistency across Western approaches to CVE, and for deeper comparative studies of how radicalisation is understood across national contexts.

II. What is Radicalisation?

Similar to never-ending debates about what constitutes terrorism (Blackbourn, Davis & Taylor, 2013; Hardy & Williams, 2011), there is no single agreed definition of radicalisation.

In a general sense, radicalisation is a process by which an individual moves towards committing a violent act based on extremist views. At the ‘most basic level, according to Neumann (2013: 874), ‘radicalization can be defined as the process whereby people become extremist’.

But what constitutes an ‘extremist’ view? Is it any idea or opinion that is contrary to a society’s core values, or does it need to be based in a coherent and recognised ideology? Does it need to justify or encourage the use of violence? Does it need to be religious or political? The answers to these questions are unclear but important: by declaring that someone has radicalised, or is at risk of radicalisation, we are implying that they are progressing on a pathway towards terrorism. This triggers more state responses and comes with many more connotations than saying that a person has progressed towards criminal conduct of another kind. We are also implying that the person has moved beyond a form of legitimate speech or political protest (even violent protest) to something morally unjustifiable.

To warrant state intervention, extremist views should justify, encourage or at the very least condone the use of violence to achieve some significant political or religious change. Ideas and opinions that are contrary to a society’s core values but create no risk of harm should be supported as part of a healthy, functioning democracy that values freedom of expression. This might seem an obvious dividing line, but the relationship between extremism, violence and free speech remains uncertain. As explained further below, the UK’s Prevent strategy continues to target non-violent ideas (Home Office, 2009, 2011; Lowe, 2017).

Some of this confusion stems from using the words ‘radical’ and ‘extreme’ to describe ideas and systems that are not in any way related to terrorism (Neumann, 2013). One can propose radical reforms to tax policy, for example, or take an ‘extreme’ approach to dieting and exercise. Other ideas – like women’s suffrage – were considered ‘radical’ in a particular historical context, but ended up overcoming discrimination and achieving greater equality.

An important distinction is often drawn between ‘cognitive’ radicalisation, which focuses on extremist beliefs, and ‘behavioural’ radicalisation, which focuses on extremist

behaviour (Neumann, 2013). This gets at the question: has somebody radicalised once they adopt and internalise extremist views, or only if they engage in some criminal conduct (such as training for terrorism) as a result? From a public policy perspective, extremist behaviour would appear to be the primary concern, but the development of extremist views is also clearly relevant. In most Western countries there are criminal offences targeting extremist behaviour, including preparatory and ancillary conduct like recruitment for terrorist organisations and collecting terrorist documents (McDonald & Carlile, 2014; Tulich, 2012). The important question for CVE policy, on the other hand, is how best to deal with people who are at risk of engaging in such behaviour – particularly young people who are not yet of the age of criminal responsibility. CVE programs also address the risks of radicalisation in a wider population through primary prevention measures (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle, & Zammitt, 2016).

There is little agreement, then, on how extremism and radicalisation should be defined, whether these are necessarily linked to terrorist behaviour, and at what point in the process it is appropriate for governments to intervene. One thing that scholars typically agree on is that radicalisation is a process, either more or less gradual. This process has been modelled in different ways. The ‘end-point’ of this process differs depending on whether the model favours a cognitive or behavioural approach (Neumann, 2013: 874). The number and type of steps involved also varies across different models. However, scholars typically agree that there are recognisable stages, and that a person ‘does not become radical overnight’ (Christmann, 2012: 10).

The well-known ‘NYPD Model’ involves four stages: *pre-radicalisation*, *self-identification* through an early exploration of Salafi Islamism, *indoctrination* through the adoption of Jihadi-Salafi ideology, and *jihadisation* by accepting the duty to participate in militant action (Silber & Bhatt, 2007). Sageman (2004, 2007) also describes four stages: a sense of moral outrage, developing a specific worldview, resonating that worldview with personal experiences, and mobilising through interactive networks. Gill’s (2007) ‘pathway’ model also has four: exposure to propaganda, the experience of a ‘catalyst’ event, pre-existing

social ties which facilitate recruitment, and in-group radicalisation. Mogghadam's (2005) Staircase model describes six steps, beginning on the 'ground floor' with psychological interpretation of injustice, then ascending through greater moral engagement and categorical thinking towards an ultimate violent act.

Other models set out eight or more steps (Taarnby, 2005), or do away with a linear, graduated approach altogether (Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Koehler, 2017; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Increasingly, scholars are moving away from a linear approach towards behavioural, relational and multi-causal models (Della Porta, 2018; Jensen, Atwell Seate, & James, 2018; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Wilner & Dubouloz, 2010). Others usefully condense the various frameworks into a single conceptual model. Koehler (2017), for example, offers a theory of 'de-pluralisation'. He describes violent radical ideologies as those which involve some 'praised future vision' (Koehler, 2017: 75). The gradual adoption of a violent radical ideology leads to the person's worldview being 'gradually rewritten, restructured and redefined' (Koehler, 2017: 75). Through this process, the person's 'understanding of core political concepts and values has dramatically changed' (Koehler, 2017: 75). Violence may then become the only option to resolve the resulting psychological tension.

Hafez and Mullins (2015) also neatly capture the core nature of radicalisation. They define it as '(1) a gradual "process" that entails socialization into an (2) extremist belief system that sets the stage for (3) violence even if it does not make it inevitable' (Hafez & Mullins, 2015: 960). Radicalisation 'involves adopting an extremist worldview, one that is rejected by mainstream society and one that deems legitimate the use of violence as a method to effect societal or political change' (Hafez & Mullins, 2015: 960).

The complexity and divergence in these accounts suggests there is little likelihood of scholars reaching a consensus over how radicalisation should be modelled. However, there is some common ground. Each model describes a person who internalises and strengthens their association with an extremist ideology. This internal process is influenced heavily by external connections to terrorist groups and networks. This is not necessarily a linear process, but

graduated models help us understand an individual's progression towards violence. As this process culminates, the individual may commit a violent act.

III. Causes of Radicalisation

The models above describe the *how* of radicalisation, but not the *why*. The reasons why an individual radicalises remain diverse and complex (Campelo et al., 2018; Desmarais et al. 2017; Sieckelinck & Gielen, 2018). Despite significant scholarly efforts, they cannot be reduced to a single psychological profile to identify who is at risk of radicalisation (Horgan, 2008, 2014; Silke, 1998). Below, these various reasons are grouped into a framework describing ideological, psychological, social, political, economic and technological factors. These factors are not competing alternatives; rather, they are each part of the 'radicalisation puzzle' (Hafez and Mullins, 2015).

These are also not pure types. There is overlap, for example, between political grievances, ideology and psychological factors. Political grievances can be a core tenet of an extremist ideology, and an individual may feel anger or frustration over these, leading them to violent action (McCauley & Maskalenko, 2008). However, the categories set out below are useful for understanding the dominant causes of radicalisation, and for later assessing how governments explain radicalisation through their national CVE policies.

Technology is more commonly considered an 'enabler' than a cause of radicalisation (Christmann, 2012; Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Silber & Bhatt, 2007). However, Islamic State has been highly successful in using social media to recruit new members and encourage lone-wolf attacks around the world (Bertram, 2016; Greenberg, 2016; Klausen, 2015; McDowell-Smith, Speckhard, & Yayla, 2017). Given these recent developments, it is increasingly appropriate to consider the influence of technology on its own terms. The impact of technology remains unclear (Conway, 2017; Koehler, 2014), but this might now be considered one of the many reasons why people radicalise, and not merely as a medium which facilitates radicalisation.

a. Ideological

It might seem obvious, even ‘tautological’ (Guhl, 2018: 192) to say that terrorism is based on an extremist ideology. Cognitive radicalisation depends upon the idea that a person internalises extremist ideas on their path towards violent action.

Clearly, many terrorist organisations encourage violent attacks based on a fundamentalist and erroneous interpretation of Islam. This comprises more specific ideas, including that ‘Western societies are morally bankrupt’, that ‘the West is engaged in a war against Muslims’, and that ‘jihad and martyrdom are indeed legitimate means by which Muslims defend their faith’ (Hafez & Mullins, 2015: 967). Together these ideas constitute an ideology because they describe a ‘master narrative about the world and one’s place in it’ (Hafez & Mullins, 2015: 961). Ideologies typically ‘demonize enemies and justify violence against them, and they incentivize sacrifice by promising heroic redemption’ (Hafez & Mullins, 2015: 961). For Neumann (2013: 880), terrorism cannot be explained without reference to these ideological assumptions, because otherwise ‘none of the behaviours make any sense’. Hoffman (2006: 82) believes that the ‘religious imperative for terrorism is the most important defining characteristic of terrorist activity today’.

Despite the seemingly obvious connection between ideology and terrorism, the causal link remains unclear (Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Christmann, 2012; Guhl, 2018; Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Schuurman & Taylor, 2018). There are two main angles to this argument. The first is that group dynamics are considered to have a greater impact than ideology (Guhl, 2018; Hafez & Mullins, 2015). The importance of groups and networks is addressed further below. However, even if further studies continue to confirm this, it does not discount the important role that ideology can play in allowing group leaders to influence younger recruits.

A second argument is that there is no necessary connection between religion and terrorism because terrorist organisations rely on a distorted interpretation of Islam. Radicalisation is difficult and problematic to explain through an ideological lens because only a small percentage of Muslims become violent extremists (Abbas, 2007; Githens-Mazer, 2008). This is certainly true, but the argument is only partly convincing: the ideology in

question is not Islam (as a religion), but rather the fundamentalist version of it relied upon by terrorist groups.

There are more convincing reasons to believe that the link between ideology and terrorism is uncertain. First, many individuals who internalise a radical ideology do not progress to committing a violent act (Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Schuurman & Taylor, 2018). Second, many terrorists are not devoutly religious; indeed, many have had only minimal exposure to extremist ideology before committing acts of violence (Cottee, 2017; Guhl, 2018). For example, two British men jailed for travelling to Syria purchased copies of *Islam for Dummies* and *The Qur'an for Dummies* before leaving to fight with Islamic State (Cottee, 2017). Finally, there are significant historical and geo-political reasons why al-Qaeda, Islamic State and other terrorist groups have called for attacks against Western interests. Key among these is the involvement of the United States and its Allies in the Middle East (Christmann, 2012; English, 2016; Hoffman, 2006). This suggests that ideology is an important factor in facilitating recruitment, but not the major cause of terrorism. The connection between ideology and terrorism remains 'easy to see but difficult to explain' (Hafez & Mullins, 2015: 967).

b. Psychological

There is no recognised pathology, medical condition or single psychological profile that explains why some people become terrorists (Horgan, 2008, 2014; Silke, 1998). However, psychological factors still contribute to radicalisation. The strongest among these are a lack of self-esteem and sense of identity, which result in the need to join a cause and feel valued by others. These needs have been described as a 'quest for significance' (Kruglanski et al., 2014) and a 'search for identity contributing to a sense of belonging, worth and purpose' (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008b: 7). According to Silverman (2017), travelling to Syria to fight with Islamic State became a 'coming of age' story in which many young men aimed to achieve personal fulfilment.

This search for identity is not sufficient in itself to explain terrorist behaviour: clearly the vast majority of young people who lack self-esteem do not become terrorists. However, it is consistently recognised as one of the most important factors, alongside group dynamics, which has allowed Islamic State and other terrorist groups to be so successful in recruiting young members from across the globe (Borum & Fein, 2017; Chassman, 2016; Christmann, 2012; Dawson & Amarasingam, 2017; Lindekilde, Bertelsen, & Stohl, 2016; Senzai, 2015).

c. Social

Another consistent finding is that social relationships are crucial to understanding radicalisation (Christmann, 2012; Della Porta, 2018; Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Maskaliūnaite, 2015; McCauley & Maskalenko, 2008; Stern, 2016). This is relevant not only to Islamist terrorism, but also left-wing and right-wing terrorism, cult membership, and gangs (Hafez & Mullins, 2015). Radicalisation is a ‘group phenomenon’ in which friends, relatives and top-down recruitment processes encourage new members to internalise a group’s common mindset (Christmann, 2012: 27). The influence exerted on new members can range from persuasion to manipulation and coercion (McCauley & Maskalenko, 2008; Maskaliūnaite, 2015). A number of processes facilitate this, including ‘group bonding, group polarisation and isolation, and peer pressure’ (Christmann, 2012: 27).

There are two main reasons why group dynamics have a significant influence on radicalisation. The first is that groups satisfy (and are able to exploit) the psychological need, particularly of young recruits, to find a sense of meaning and purpose. Membership of a group and participation in its activities satisfies the psychological ‘quest for significance’ (Kruglanski et al., 2014). The second reason is that groups amplify the costs of leaving once an individual has joined. Even if an individual loses faith in the group’s ideology, strategic or tactics, they cannot easily exit. There will be feelings of loyalty, guilt, and anxiety about returning to a previous ‘normal’ life (Hafez & Mullins, 2015). There may also be fear of criminal sanction by the state or punishment by the group itself. In other words, the

‘emotional, psychological, material, and physical costs of exit can be prohibitively high to those seeking to walk away from extremists’ (Hafez & Mullins, 2015: 965).

d. Political

There is ongoing disagreement over the influence that political grievances have on radicalisation. Key among these grievances is a sense of injustice over Western involvement in the Middle East – particularly the invasion of Iraq. Hafez and Mullins (2015: 962) ‘do not find compelling any argument’ that these kinds of grievances play a causal role in behavioral radicalization. Maskaliūnaite (2015: 19), on the other hand, argues that ‘perceived injustice’ is one of the ‘strongest motivators’ to join a violent group. Other reports and survey data confirm that grievances are ‘key explanatory factors driving radicalisation’, especially those concerning Western foreign policy (Christmann, 2012: 26).

Political grievances are insufficient to explain why some people join extremist groups and not others. However, their importance should not be understated. To begin with, political grievances cannot be neatly separated from ideological concerns about the West being ‘morally bankrupt’ and ‘at war with Islam’ (Hafez & Mullins, 2015). Terrorist groups routinely use political and geo-political reasons as part of the ideology justifying their actions. This dates back well before 9/11. A major grievance underlying bin Laden’s 1996 fatwa was the close military relationship between Saudi Arabia and the US (English, 2016; Hoffman, 2006). This led to attacks, prior to 9/11, against the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the USS Cole in Aden. Each of these attacks was designed to make the United States withdraw its troops from the Middle East. When that did not happen, the US homeland became al-Qaeda’s target.

Even Islamic State (IS), which maintains a more apocalyptic version of Salafi Jihadism than al-Qaeda, has significant geo-political reasons for its actions. After coming declaring its Caliphate, IS dismantled the physical boundary separating Iraq and Syria. That boundary was imposed by the French and British governments under the Sykes-Picot Agreement that followed World War One (Sengupta, 2015). It is unlikely that these geo-

political grievances play a significant role in causing a young individual halfway across the globe to commit an act of terrorism. However, political grievances provide an important backdrop under which terrorist organisations are able to recruit more members and encourage further attacks.

e. Economic

Many recent terrorist attacks have been committed by well-educated, middle class offenders (Porter & Kebell, 2011; Silber & Bhatt, 2007; Smith & Nolan, 2016). There is therefore no necessary connection between low socio-economic status and a risk of terrorism. Empirical studies have also rejected the suggestion that countries which experience higher levels of poverty experience higher levels of terrorism (Abadie, 2006; Piazza, 2011).

However, socio-economic disadvantage can play a causal role in radicalisation by aggravating perceptions of injustice. This is captured in the theory of ‘relative deprivation’, meaning that a person is aware that others have better material conditions or higher social status in comparison to them, and the person perceives these differences to be unjust (Christmann, 2012). Relative deprivation can operate on an individual, group or international level (Christmann, 2012).

Economic disparity is therefore also relevant, and may facilitate radicalisation if combined with personal experience of discrimination. According to Hafez and Mullins (2015: 962), many Muslim communities in Europe experience isolation and discrimination, and this can contribute to higher levels of criminality:

At the risk of overly generalizing, one can point to several developments that have contributed to Muslim disenchantment with their European host societies. These include poor socioeconomic status due to unemployment rates that are consistently higher than the national averages. Although the Muslim population of Europe contains many educated middle class professionals and wealthy individuals, this is not the case for the majority of the population that occupies the lower end of the socioeconomic

scale. Unemployment combines with residential discrimination and segregation to produce ethnically homogenous neighborhoods that are mostly dilapidated. High levels of residential concentration and poor housing conditions contribute to higher levels of criminality. Unemployment, poverty, and crime, in turn, produce the usual stereotypes concerning the “uncivilized” foreigners.

Other studies confirm a link between minority discrimination and extremism. One study of over 2,500 Muslims residing in Europe and the US found that perceived discrimination towards Muslims was significantly associated with the belief that suicide bombing is justified (Victoroff, Adelman, & Matthews, 2012). Another study of 172 countries found a strong link between economic discrimination against minority groups and an increased risk of terrorism (Piazza, 2011).

f. Technological

Finally, technology is increasingly seen as important factor contributing to radicalisation. Islamic State has been hugely successful in recruiting young fighters from around the globe by posting slick propaganda videos on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook (Greenberg, 2016; Klausen, 2015; McDowell-Smith, Speckhard, & Yayla, 2017). As Greenberg (2016: 166) explains, this strategy ‘speaks directly to the youth it is targeting for recruitment, using the medium that works best for these youth’.

Islamic State’s global reach would not have been possible without the Internet. However, the causal link between viewing extremist material on the Internet and radicalisation remains unclear. It is more common for individuals to view extremist material online while being radicalised through group networks and social relationships. It is less common for them to ‘self-radicalise’ purely through exposure to extremist material online, without any human connection (Stevens & Neumann, 2009). As Conway (2016: 77) explains, there is ‘no yet proven connection between consumption of and networking around violent

extremist online content and adoption of extremist ideology and/or engagement in violent extremism and terrorism’.

g. Summary

There is no single definition or model of radicalisation, and its causes are various and complex. However, there are sufficient common themes across the literature to draw some general observations. Radicalisation is a gradual though not necessarily linear process in which a person internalises and strengthens their association with an extremist ideology while moving towards violent action. Extremist ideas are those which justify the use of violence to achieve political or religious change. This process is influenced heavily by external groups and networks.

The reasons why people embark on this process are complex. They are not reducible to a singular psychological or economic profile, though some factors have greater impact than others. These factors and an assessment of the current state of the literature are summarised in Table 1. Young people who lack self-esteem and a strong sense of identity can be more easily persuaded, manipulated or coerced by terrorist groups to adopt an extremist ideology. Political grievances (including anger about Western involvement in the Middle East) and economic disparity (where combined with discrimination against minority communities) provide important context. Technology increases the risks of radicalisation by allowing terrorist groups to communicate their propaganda globally and speak directly to a younger audience.

Table 1. Causes of Radicalisation

Factors	Influence on Radicalisation
<i>Ideological</i>	Core to understanding terrorist propaganda, but the impact of ideology on radicalisation remains difficult to establish because many radicals are not violent, many terrorists are not devoutly religious, and terrorist organisations have strategic aims.
<i>Psychological</i>	Cannot be reduced to a single profile or pathology but a lack of self-esteem and sense of identity are key to understanding why young people are drawn to terrorist organisations
<i>Social</i>	A key contributing factor which allows terrorist groups and networks to manipulate, persuade or coerce individuals into adopting an extremist ideology
<i>Political</i>	A sense of injustice over Western involvement in the Middle East provides important context and remains an important aspect of terrorist recruitment and propaganda
<i>Economic</i>	Terrorism is not linked to poverty or low socio-economic status, but economic disparity can influence radicalisation where combined with a personal experience of minority discrimination
<i>Technological</i>	The influence of technology on behavioural radicalisation remains unclear, but the Internet and social media allow terrorist organisations to have global reach and speak to a younger audience

IV. Methods and Sources

The analysis below compares this scholarly research on radicalisation with Western CVE policy. Part Five draws on case studies of CVE policy in the UK, Australia, Denmark, Sweden and The Netherlands. The main data sources for each case study are the CVE policy documents published by each national government (Home Office, 2011, 2015; Australian Government, 2015; Government of Denmark, 2016; Löfven & Kuhnke, 2014; Ministry of Security and Justice, 2014), and, where available, each government's national counter-terrorism strategy (Council of Australian Governments, 2015; Home Office, 2018; Löfven & Ygeman, 2014; National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, 2016). The analysis focuses on current policy, though previous policies have been included where they explain key elements of the current policy, mark significant changes in that policy over time, or fill gaps in how radicalisation is currently explained (Government of Denmark, 2009, 2014; Home Office, 2009; Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2007).

The case study countries have been selected on the basis that they exhibit core similarities and important differences. The countries have similar political, legal and democratic traditions and have recently published counter-terrorism policy in response to Islamic State in a broadly similar format. Sweden's counter-terrorism strategy, for example, comprises three strands ('Prevent', 'Preempt' and 'Protect') (Löfven & Ygeman, 2014), which directly mirror those found in the UK's CONTEST strategy (Home Office, 2018). The countries all face an ongoing serious threat of terrorism related to returning foreign fighters and related homegrown terrorism.

At the same time, each country has a different experience with terrorism and counter-terrorism, which allows for fruitful comparison. The UK's long history of responding to terrorism in the colonies and Northern Ireland (Newsinger, 2015) contrasts with Sweden's experience of responding to right-wing extremism (Bjørge, 1993), and with the comparatively limited experience of the remaining countries. The UK has experienced a series of serious

recent attacks, while Sweden, Australia and Denmark have experienced some recent attacks on a smaller scale.

These countries also have contrasting experiences with CVE. The UK's experience with Prevent has been longstanding but highly problematic (Briggs, 2010; Lakhani, 2012). Denmark has been praised for its innovative approaches to offender reintegration (Young et al., 2016). The Netherlands' approach has focused to a greater extent on integration and has developed over time from a community-based strategy to a national approach (Koehler, 2017: 248). Australia has invested much less in CVE, devoting most of its resources to coercive legal responses to terrorism (Hardy & Williams, 2016). It has looked closely to the UK in designing its own counter-terrorism laws and policy (Roach, 2006), but a key difference is that Australia remains the only democratic nation without national human rights protection (Williams, 2007). This has allowed the Australian Parliament to enact some of the world's most extraordinary legal responses to terrorism (Hardy & Williams, 2016).

Part Five presents the results of a qualitative study into these countries' national CVE and counter-terrorism policies. The core aim of this study was to assess the extent to which these policy documents accurately reflect the current scholarly research on radicalisation. Three research questions shaped the analysis, and the policy documents were coded according to themes identified in the literature review above. First, how do these countries define radicalisation and extremism in their CVE policy? Second, how do these countries explain the causes of radicalisation, and which factor(s) do they consider to be the most important? Finally, do their policies explain radicalisation in ways that are consistent or at least broadly compatible?

Balancing diversity and consistency across CVE policy remains a difficult challenge. On the one hand, some variation in these policies should be expected and encouraged. There may well be cultural, political and historical reasons why these countries approach CVE and explain radicalisation in different ways (some of these are addressed below). Individuals will radicalise for reasons that are specific to their local context. The UK's experience with

Prevent demonstrates that CVE programs should be designed with local needs in mind (Briggs, 2010; Lakhani, 2012).

At the same time, it is reasonable to expect that these countries should explain radicalisation in ways that are broadly consistent and compatible. Each country faces a similar type of threat: of ‘foreign fighters’ who have travelled to Iraq and Syria, and related homegrown terrorism. These threats are based on the same al-Qaeda-inspired ideology, disseminated through the Islamic State’s sophisticated propaganda machine. Their foreign fighters have travelled to the same conflict zones to fight with the same terrorist organisation, and returned home to countries with similar democratic, legal and political systems. There is no significant practical reason why one country should explain radicalisation primarily through an ideological lens, for example, and another to define it as a social or psychological phenomenon. To the extent that the scholarly research identifies recurring themes in how and why people radicalise, CVE programs should model that process in at least broadly similar ways. There is also a need for Western governments to maintain consistent (or at least compatible) explanations of radicalisation so they can cooperate effectively when countering the global threat.

The analysis below represents an initial exploration of how well the current scholarly research is integrated into Western CVE policy, and an initial comparative study of how these countries explain radicalisation and extremism. There remains a need for deeper and more extensive comparisons of how radicalisation is understood across different national contexts. There is also a need for further academic debate on the extent to which CVE policy and programs should be consistently designed.

V. Countering Violent Extremism Policy

How, then, do these countries understand and model the radicalisation process in their national CVE policy? Are their approaches in line with the scholarly research? And do they offer consistent explanations of its causes?

Each country's policy adequately captures the core nature of radicalisation – as a complex process in which a person gradually adopts an extremist ideology. These policy definitions of radicalisation are set out in Table 2.

Table 2. Definitions of radicalisation in national CVE policy.

Country	Policy Definition of Radicalisation
<i>United Kingdom</i>	'Radicalisation refers to the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism' (Home Office, 2011: 108).
<i>Australia</i>	'Radicalisation is a complex process that can occur for people across a diverse range of ethnic, national, political and religious groups. The process involves a series of decisions which, in certain circumstances will end in an act of violent extremism' (Australian Government, 2015: 4)
<i>Denmark</i>	'Radicalisation refers to a short- or long-term process where persons subscribe to extremist views or legitimise their actions on the basis of extremist ideologies' (Government of Denmark, 2016: 7).
<i>Sweden</i>	'Those who commit ideologically motivated acts for political or religious reasons have gone through a process in which they have gradually come to adopt a violent ideology or accept violence as a legitimate method which the scope of a political or religious ideology. This process is called radicalisation' (Löfven & Kuhnke, 2014).
<i>Netherlands</i>	'Radicalisation is a process that involves an increasing willingness to accept and act – perhaps violently – on even the most extreme implications of an ideology. Radicalisation can also be seen as the process by which individuals move from lawful activism towards extremism and, subsequently, terrorism' (National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, 2014: 6).

The Netherlands' current definition is significantly narrower than that found in its earlier action plan (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2007). That earlier policy defined radicalisation as the 'willingness to strive for far-reaching changes in society (possibly in an undemocratic manner), to support such changes or persuade others to accept them' (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2007: 5). This captured a far greater range of conduct, and could have plausibly included political protest, industrial action and other legitimate dissent. Defining radicalisation as an 'attitude' (Ministry of Security and Justice, 2014: 33) also failed to capture the complex, gradual nature of the process. It suggested instead that a simple change in perspective would be sufficient for a person to radicalise.

With the exception of the UK, these policies also adequately capture the core nature of extremism and relate it consistently to the possibility of violent action. Australia targets violent extremism, which is said to be present 'where a person or group decides that fear, terror and violence are justified to achieve ideological, political or social change, and then acts on these beliefs' (Australian Government, 2015: 10). Sweden describes the adoption of a violent ideology, meaning that a person 'accepts violence and sometimes also that they commit ideologically motivated crimes' (Löfven & Kuhnke, 2014: 16). Denmark targets 'extremism' rather than violent extremism, but defines extremism by reference to legitimising violence (Government of Denmark, 2016: 7). The Netherlands now links extremism to 'breaking the law and executing (violent) illegal actions (Ministry of Security and Justice, 2014: 31). These approaches are, in other words, focused on behavioural radicalisation – or at least the risk of a violent act as the end-point of the process.

Beyond these core similarities, there are important differences. The UK is a significant outlier in defining the scope of its Prevent strategy in very broad terms. Since 2009, the UK government (Home Office, 2009) has defined extremism to include non-violent ideas. This means views and opinions which involve 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance for different faiths and beliefs' (Home Office, 2011: 107). In other words, the scope

of Prevent clearly extends to cognitive radicalisation. This targets a much broader range of speech and opinions than would ordinarily be of concern to police and security services. As a result, it has raised significant concerns over free speech and discrimination against Britain's Muslim communities (Briggs, 2010; Dudenhoefer, 2018; Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010; Lakhani, 2012; Lowe, 2017).

There are also important differences in the weight given to different causes of radicalisation. Each country recognises there are multiple contributing factors, but there is significant variation in which cause is viewed as the primary driver. The current Danish strategy offers little explanation of why people radicalise, but its earlier action plan focused on the psychological search for identity (Government of Denmark, 2009: 8). The Netherlands also identifies psychological factors as being important, but its policies have focused consistently on a lack of integration and the polarization of ethnic communities (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2007). Australia's strategy focuses equally on three main elements, being ideology, social networks and prior criminal behavior (Australian Government, 2015: 8). Sweden focuses on propaganda and the Internet, as well as ideology and political grievances (Löfven & Kuhnke, 2014). Sweden is arguably alone in focusing on the role of grievances, including a sense of injustice generated by Islamophobia and military interventions (Löfven & Kuhnke, 2014: 15). These dominant policy explanations of why people radicalise are summarised in Table 3.

The UK is an outlier in giving the greatest weight to ideological factors. The first objective of Prevent is to counter ideology, and the other causes of radicalisation relate back to this primary goal. Rather than being significant causes on their own terms, psychological and social factors are said to influence radicalisation by making extremist ideology more attractive:

We judge that radicalisation is driven by an ideology which sanctions the use of violence; by propagandists for that ideology here and overseas; and by personal vulnerabilities and specific local factors which, for a range of reasons, make that

ideology seem both attractive and compelling (Home Office, 2011: 5).

This focus on combating ideology could also be seen in Prime Minister David Cameron's 2011 Munich speech (UK Government, 2011). More recently, it has carried through into the 2015 counter-extremism strategy. In a foreword to that strategy, Cameron spoke of defeating a 'poisonous ideology' and the 'scourge of extremism' (Home Office, 2015: 6-7). The strategy focused on Islamic State's extremist narrative and the cultural threat this entails:

ISIL is a particularly grotesque manifestation of an extreme Islamist narrative, which seeks to impose a new Islamic state governed by a harsh interpretation of Shari'a as state law and totally rejects liberal values such as democracy, the rule of law and equality (Home Office, 2015: 22).

The strategy discusses the threat from alternative systems of Sharia law, the rejection of democracy, and controversial cultural practices like female genital mutilation (Home Office, 2015).

This combative language focusing on the ideological and cultural threat of terrorism was toned down significantly in the most recent review of CONTEST (Home Office, 2018). That document recognises the threat from right-wing extremism to a greater extent, and it emphasizes the benefits of public-private partnerships and a multi-agency approach. The Prevent strand returns to the idea of building community 'resilience' to extremism (Home Office, 2018). However, the policy retains a focus on ideology as a 'strong driver' of radicalisation and recognises other factors to a lesser extent (Home Office, 2018: 16). The focus continues to be on the ideological threat from al-Qaeda and Islamic State. In addition, the earlier Prevent and Counter-Extremism strategies remain current and relevant (Home Office, 2011, 2015).

Table 3. Dominant causes of radicalisation in CVE policy.

Country	Dominant Explanations of Radicalisation
United Kingdom	Ideological
Australia	Ideological Social Criminal (not supported)
Denmark	Psychological
Sweden	Ideological Technological Political
Netherlands	Psychological Cultural (not supported)

None of these approaches is fundamentally inaccurate, and there are positive features – but they differ in important ways and none implement the available research across the board. The scholarly literature suggests that ideology and technology are not primary drivers of radicalisation. The literature suggests that social networks and psychology are the most influential, but these causes are under-represented in government policy. The Netherlands draws a link between terrorism and a lack of integration which is not empirically supported (Rahimi & Graumans, 2015). Australia draws a link to prior criminal behavior which is not reflected in the literature. Overall, there is significant scope for improvement as to how accurately and consistently these policies define the causes of radicalisation.

The clash of cultures described in UK policy is particularly problematic. It is inconsistent with the scholarly literature, which suggests that psychological and social factors have a greater impact (Guhl, 2018; Hafez & Mullins, 2015). More importantly, the rhetoric is

dangerous because it reinforces the very idea – captured in the extremist worldview of terrorist organisations – that the West is at war with Islam. It is no surprise, given this focus on the ideological threat, that Prevent has suffered from criticism for its heavy focus on Islamist terrorism and disproportionate focus on Muslim communities (Briggs, 2010; Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010; Kyriacou, Reed, Said, & Davies, 2017; Lakhani, 2012).

These results suggest two things, each requiring further investigation. First, the way that a government explains radicalisation in its national policy can affect the *design* of its CVE programs. A government which focuses on the ideological causes of radicalisation (Home Office, 2011, 2015) is likely to invest more resources in counter-narratives, de-radicalisation programs, and efforts to support ‘moderate’ Muslim leaders. A government which focuses on the polarization of ethnic communities (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2007) is likely to devote more resources to improving integration. A government which explains radicalisation by reference to criminal behavior and social bonds (Australian Government, 2015) is likely to devote resources to disrupting terrorist groups, and so on.

Second, the UK’s experience suggests that the way a government explains radicalisation can impact on the *success* of its CVE programs. Explaining radicalisation primarily by reference to extremist ideology is likely to create damaging perceptions that the government is targeting Muslim communities.

There are many justifiable reasons why CVE policy differs across these countries. Some of the variation can be explained by the lack of any definite answers as to how and why radicalisation happens. Empirical research on radicalisation continues, but a true consensus is unlikely to ever be reached. Other differences can be explained historically and politically. Sweden’s national strategy, for example, focuses on right-wing extremism to a much greater extent than any of the other policies (Löfven & Kuhnke, 2014). Given Sweden’s significant experience with militant neo-Nazi groups (Bjørge, 1993), this remains an appropriate strategy for that context. It is unreasonable to expect that the other countries could simply replicate Sweden’s approach without the same historical background.

Other differences might be explained by different threat levels, whether a country has experienced recent successful attacks, and contrasting approaches to integration. The UK's more combative response to extremist ideology, for example, might be explained by the series of recent attacks in London and a 'backlash' against multiculturalism (Abass, 2007; Bertossi, 2011). In his Munich speech, David Cameron suggested that young men were turning to terrorism because multiculturalism policy had led to a 'weakening of our collective identity' and an acceptance of segregation (UK Government, 2011). This suggests that CVE policy can be shaped less by evidence-based research, and more so by local politics, history and culture.

At the same time, for the reasons explained in Part Four, it is reasonable to expect that governments will draw on evidence-based research to the greatest extent available, and that their explanations of radicalisation remain broadly consistent. There are no definite answers to how or why people radicalise, but there are sufficient common themes to guide a consistent, evidence-based approach. As it stands, more work is required to achieve this level of accuracy and consistency.

VI. Conclusion

Radicalisation is a complex process with no easy explanations. In a basic sense, a person radicalises where they adopt an extremist ideology and gradually move towards violent action. Beyond this, there are no definite answers as to how and why people radicalise, because the particular process and influences involved differ in each individual case. This makes it difficult for governments to design national policy strategies for countering extremism and radicalisation.

This article has analysed models and theories of radicalisation and assessed whether this scholarly research is accurately reflected in Western CVE policy. Case studies of the UK, Australia, Denmark, Sweden and The Netherlands suggest that national CVE policies

adequately capture the core nature of radicalisation, but otherwise exhibit significant variation in how they explain its causes.

While these countries accurately recognise multiple causes of radicalisation, they choose to focus on one or more factors which they see as the primary driver. The primary drivers of radicalisation are variously considered to be social, ideological, psychological, or technological. More work is needed to ensure the accuracy and consistency of these causal explanations against scholarly standards.

The UK is a notable outlier. Its Prevent strategy targets non-violent ideas and focuses to the greatest extent on extremist ideology. This approach is not only inconsistent with the scholarly literature, which suggests that psychological and social factors have a greater impact (Guhl, 2018; Hafez & Mullins, 2015). It has also contributed to criticisms that Prevent work impacts on free speech and further alienates Britain's Muslim communities (Kyriacou et al., 2017).

How a government explains radicalisation in its national policy strategies is not merely semantic, and can have a significant impact on the design and success of its CVE programs. A focus on ideological factors is likely to see greater investments in counter-narratives, a focus on psychological factors is likely to see more counselling for young people, and so on. There is a need to ensure that these explanations and the strategies used to counter radicalisation are based in the available evidence. A heavy focus on ideology as the primary driver of radicalisation is not only inaccurate; it is also likely to undermine the success of CVE programs by aggravating perceptions that governments are targeting Muslim communities with counter-terrorism powers.

Empirical evaluations of CVE programs are limited but growing in number (Feddes & Gallucci, 2015; Mastroe, 2016; Zeiger & Aly, 2015). The current study suggests that deeper comparative research is needed into CVE policy and how this impacts on the shape and success of CVE programs on the ground. Comparing CVE policy and programs across national borders remains an important task.

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