

Understanding the Process of Radicalisation from Psychological Perspective

LITERATURE REVIEW

By
Dr. Ayşenur Benevento

**ERC AdG Post-doctoral Researcher
European Institute
İstanbul Bilgi University**

April 9, 2020

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.3750753](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3750753)

**ERC AdG PRIME Youth
ISLAM-OPHOB-ISM
785934**



**İstanbul
Bilgi University**

Preface

This literature review, prepared by Dr. Ayşenur Benevento, investigates the psychology's foundational theories and overviews their contributions to the study of radicalisation from a psychological perspective. This review focuses on the Psychoanalytic, Cognitive, Behaviourist and Socio-Cultural schools of thought, which have different approaches to the human psyche and the processes of change. This study illustrates that theories in Psychology identify various distinct elements as contributing factors to radicalisation. Through identifying the commonalities and disparities among the four schools of thought, this review contends that these different approaches do not invalidate each other but rather provide alternative pictures of the radicalisation process.

This literature review was prepared in the scope of the ongoing EU-funded research for the "PRIME Youth" project conducted under the supervision of the Principal Investigator, Prof. Dr. Ayhan Kaya, and funded by the European Research Council with the Agreement Number 785934.

AYHAN KAYA

Jean Monnet Chair of European Politics of Interculturalism

Director, European Institute

Istanbul Bilgi University

Abstract

This paper derives from the ongoing “Nativism, Islamophobia and Islamism in the Age of Populism: Culturalisation and Religionisation of what is Social, Economic and Political in Europe” project conducted under the supervision of the Principle Investigator, Prof. Dr. Ayhan Kaya, and funded by the European Research Council with the Agreement Number 785934. The purpose of this article is to investigate the psychology’s foundational theories and seek how they have (or might have) contributed to the study of radicalisation from psychological perspective. Radicalisation theories are diverse, though not necessarily antagonistic to each other. Rather, each model addresses a somewhat different aspect of radicalisation, or depicts it from a distinctive disciplinary perspective at a different level of analysis. Psychology - the study of individuals’ beliefs, thoughts, emotions and behaviour, may be uniquely positioned to assess and inform theories of radicalisation. This paper selected four psychological schools of thought - Psychoanalytic, Cognitive, Behaviourist and Socio-Cultural – to assess and inform theories of radicalisation. These four psychological approaches focus on different aspects of human psyche and study processes of change differently. Taken independently, each offers a valuable conceptualization of radicalisation experience. Taken together, however, certain commonalities emerge. These commonalities indicate factors that are deemed important contributors to radicalisation.

Introduction

As part of the ongoing EU-funded research for the ongoing “Nativism, Islamophobia and Islamism in the Age of Populism: Culturalisation and Religionisation of what is Social, Economic and Political in Europe” project conducted under the supervision of the Principle Investigator, Prof. Dr. Ayhan Kaya, and funded by the European Research Council with the Agreement Number 785934, this paper provides an understanding of psychology’s theoretical contribution to the topic of radicalisation, which is a topic many other different disciplines (e.g. political science, sociology, anthropology, law, etc.) are also interested in. The purpose of this article is to investigate the psychology’s foundational theories and seek how they have (or might have) contributed to the study of radicalisation from a psychological perspective. In order to understand more about how psychology approached the concept of radicalisation, which literally means going back to the roots, the current article will attempt to delve deep into the main theories of psychology.

As Poggie (1965: 284) said, "A way of seeing is a way of not seeing." One gains a more complete understanding of a phenomenon by examining the interplay between different perspectives because any one theoretical perspective invariably offers only a partial account of a complex phenomenon. Moreover, the connection of different theoretical perspectives brings into focus contrasting worldviews and constructs. Working out the relationships between such seemingly conflicting views provides opportunities to develop a new understanding of the same phenomenon that has stronger and broader explanatory power than the initial perspectives. Some integration of different ways of approaching the same topic is thus desirable, but it must preserve the distinctiveness of alternative theories. The author of this review is content that such integration is possible if different perspectives are viewed as providing alternative pictures of the same process without invalidating each other. By identifying the viewpoints from each theory and the circumstances when these theories are interrelated, a comprehensive understanding of radicalisation process might be possible. Such an open-minded approach preserves the authenticity of distinct theories, and at the same time advances theory building and provides stronger and broader explanatory power of radicalisation processes.

This paper covered sources from the PsycINFO database, including the keywords *radicalisation* and *radicalization*.¹ Individual searches conducted for radicalisation process yielded few review articles,

¹ American and British variants of the word was searched separately to ensure the reliability of the research.

from which relevant studies were obtained from reference lists. To ensure an in-depth search, the researcher also reviewed published doctoral dissertations and non-peer reviewed articles. The review includes a few articles over 20 years old. The reasoning was to capture the iterative process that has taken place over time within the field. Radicalism, while highly researched, has suffered in terms of methodology, reliability, as well as with conceptual and theoretical flaws. This is true of both early and late studies.

A Brief Information on How Psychology Theorizes and Studies Processes of Change: Stage and Non-stage Theories

The current paper would like to establish one point about radicalisation before starting to focus on psychological theories: the term *radicalisation* refers to a process rather than to a static state. Here, radicalism is not considered as an endpoint that individuals arrive at. In addition, radicalism does not always involve behaviour, let alone a violent one. Unfortunately, a quick assessment of the literature revealed that the confusion about the use of terms such as terrorism, violent extremism, political violence, and radicalism persist among scholars who review and study the topic of radicalisation from psychological perspective. It is not surprising, for example, to read a review titled as Theories in Radicalisation and find relevant resources seeking ‘causes of terrorism’ or ‘links between violent extremism and contributing factors’ (see, Kruglanski, Bélanger, & Gunaratna, 2019). Integrity

If radicalisation is recognized as a process then learning about how psychology has approached processes involving behavioural, emotional and cognitive change might be helpful in theorizing the phenomenon further. Modern psychology refuses to believe that human psyche has a fixed way of being. The field, now, acknowledges that humans are influenced both by their life experiences and genetic makeup, which are in turn constantly adapting to humans’ surroundings. The way psychology approaches to humans’ quest of change differs based on *how* it believes the change in life occurs. Whether change happens continuously or discontinuously is one of the main questions of psychology and very much influences one’s theoretical stance.

Stage and Non-stage Theories

Theories that accept discontinuous perspective regard change as taking place in stages. Stages are theoretical constructs. Described as stage theories, theories that use such distinct constructs emphasise qualitative changes in thoughts, emotions and behaviours and organize differences that happen during the course of change in a rigid way. In other words, according to the stage theories, change is sudden and follows a path in the same way across all humans. For instance, a stage theory of radical behaviour would specify an ordered set of categories into which people could be classified (e.g. Islamist, nativist, etc.) and would identify the factors that can trigger movement from one category (e.g. perception of discrimination) to the next (e.g. group membership). Given such theory, a social scientist could identify critical stage or stages and focus resources on understanding factors that would move people to the next stage. If the main motivation is to intervene during the process of the development of a radical behaviour, a theory that successfully describes these stages makes possible the matching of interventions to individuals and the sequencing of interventions.

Under the stage theories, what humans are likely to do at approximately what state, level, or age are emphasised, but not how or why they do it. The process is undisclosed and largely unknown. Theories that claim that process of change follows a continuous path, the ones we can call non-stage theories, accept that individuals are *becoming* and *being* perpetually. People move from one state to another, not always sequentially and naturally, but very much influenced by the socio-cultural context they are in and their interpretations of it. Stage theories that focus on the existence of qualitatively different stages often miss many of the continuously changing observable phenomena that are of importance in human life cross-culturally. For instance, the way a woman with a minority background experiences discrimination is qualitatively different than another woman with a majority status experiences discrimination. The place (e.g. in Europe, in a diverse city, rural town, etc.) and the time (e.g. during childhood, in the 60's, etc.) the two women experience discrimination also matters for a detailed analysis of how and why they feel that way. Stage theories lack the level of contextual sensitivity needed to examine different and similar patterns in the process of change across various circumstances.

Both the stage and non-stage theories have become popular in psychology as they offer a method to understand human thoughts, emotions and behaviour, and most importantly, they are testable. Especially stage theories often invoke internal processes as causal factors, advancing hypotheses difficult to confirm/disprove with empirical research. Stage theories are proved to be helpful for scholars to reproduce and modify existing models. Such models conveying psychological processes in a step-by-

step fashion have a strong influence on policies and intervention strategies, as they offer easy to understand and less obscure action to reverse undesirable human behaviour. On one hand, what counts as an undesirable human thought, emotion or behaviour across different contexts is very much debatable. On the other hand, only few thoughts, emotions or behaviours are well-established to be objectionable not only by law but also from a moral stance. For instance, acting violently despite knowing that they would hurt someone else, whether physically or emotionally, are principally considered offensive and unsolicited. Because many of us accept that behaviours that hurt others *should not* be tolerated, what contributes to such behaviours to become in existence has turned out to be a very important topic to investigate.

Many models, especially stage theories about radicalisation, claim that it is a process through which individuals become increasingly motivated to use violent means to achieve the change they desire in society and politics. Given the increasing statistics of violent extremist and terrorist actions in the past 30 years in a global world, understanding “*what goes on before the bomb goes off*” has become very intriguing for social scientists to respond to what has been accepted as a global problem. Accordingly, many psychological studies of radicalisation have been primarily oriented toward either identifying the phases or contributing factors that lead to violent behaviour and/or mapping the characteristics of individuals who were identified as terrorists. However, not all radicalisation necessarily leads to violence, nor radicalisation is always negative (Bjorgo & John, 2009; Fraihi, 2008). Only few individuals who radicalise participate in violent behaviour as there exists a distinction between accepting radical ideas and actively participating in violent action as a result of those ideas (Wilner & Dubouloz, 2010). Horgan (2009) suggests that examination of violent radicalisation requires a shift in focus from “the pursuit of *profiles* to the mapping of *pathways*” and from a search of “root causes to the identification of *outer qualities*” (Horgan, 2009: 1). The following sections will select the four psychological schools of thought - Psychoanalytic, Cognitive, Behaviourist and Socio-Cultural – to assess and inform theories of radicalisation.

Psychological Approaches Explaining Who Radicalizes and How

Radicalisation theories are diverse, though not necessarily antagonistic to each other. Rather, each model addresses a somewhat different aspect of radicalisation, or depicts it from a distinctive disciplinary perspective at a different level of analysis. Psychology - the study of individuals’ beliefs, thoughts, emotions and behaviour, may be uniquely positioned to assess and inform theories of radicalisation. The four psychological approaches that are selected for this critical paper focus on different aspects of human

psyche, and attribute reasons for their difference across humans. Taken independently, each offers a valuable conceptualization of radicalisation experience. Taken together, however, certain commonalities emerge. These commonalities indicate factors that are deemed important contributors to radicalisation.

Psychoanalytic Approach

The psychoanalytic approach originally stems from Sigmund Freud, who is considered as the father of psychology. This approach emphasises the self (ego), which is influenced by less conscious impulses and needs (id), and by internal criticism and ideals (superego). The theory claims that there is a direct link between one's childhood experiences and the events that adults experience, and the psychoanalysis aims to interpret existing tensions within human mind. In a clinical setting, such interpretations either reduce the tension or allow memories to make sense for the adult. Such interpretations of cases that share common tensions or behaviour patterns also allow us to profile and understand human mind by generating testable predictions. For example, psychoanalytic approach suggests that ablution might predict obsessional-compulsive disorder among Muslims (Lifton, 2007).

Psychoanalytic theory is considered as the first to examine how human mind works and how we become who we are. The latter inquiry is especially important for this review for emphasizing the process of *becoming*. The theory claims that process of change happens discontinuously, in stages, and the extent to which we resolve each stage successfully bears crucial implications for the future. An individual might get stuck or *fixated* in a stage and experience difficulty moving ahead to the next stage and portray psychological abnormality later in the process. Psychoanalysis claims that psychological abnormality can determine or explain behaviours and motives.

Theoretically, the psychoanalysis is not interested in studying the 'normal' and always works backwards, which means that the work starts from what is considered as the end of the process. The above section discussed how violent thoughts, emotions and behaviours are considered damaging both for the individual the ones being impacted by them directly. In the meantime, for a thought, emotion or behaviour to be considered abnormal one other condition is them to be rare among other humans. Thus, according to the psychoanalytic approach, when they take violent forms, radical thoughts, emotions and behaviours might be identified as abnormal. Given that violent radical activity can be clearly defined as a form of 'abnormal' activity, the psychoanalytic approach has had much to contribute to the understanding of violent radicalisation. By this logic, the case this review made earlier - not all radicalisation is negative – would not be accepted by the researchers who ground their work on

psychoanalytic theory. Thus, many who claimed to have studied radicalisation from psychoanalytic lenses (Adorno et al. 1950; Lifton 1961; Post, 1998; Rogers et al., 2007; Silke, 2003; Strenger, 2015; Taylor 2004) had to suggest that extremists and terrorists are psychologically abnormal and that radicalisation process can be understood by studying extremists and terrorists.

Psychoanalytic literature might be important for two reasons: 1) it complements to cognitive and social psychological models of political violence, especially in considering the unconscious and symbolic aspects of intergroup political and ideological conflicts and 2) it provides a template for clinicians who may encounter early signs of radicalisation in patients before any organizational affiliation and tactical measures take place (Cohen, 2019). Although classical psychoanalytic concepts such as the Oedipus Complex and the Death Drive have generally fallen out of favour in clinical practice, they are still used by philosophers, literary critics, and psychoanalytic sociologists to understand the connection between individuals and social conflicts (see Kristeva, 2018). However, over the years, psychoanalysis and its applications have been strongly criticised for being unscientific and not sensitive to diversity of human contexts. Unfortunately, many researchers and ‘experts’ who suggest that terrorists are psychologically abnormal tend to be the ones with the least amount of contact with actual terrorists compared to those with direct contact who find that suggestions of abnormality do not stand up to close examination (Silke, 1998). Trying to be established as a hard science that relies on empirical evidence, modern psychology has denied psychoanalytic theory, which is very case-based and insufficient to draw generalizable conclusions applicable to many individuals.

Cognitivist Approach

Psychologists have generated variety of perspectives to explain how our thinking and learning changes. Cognitivist theories in cognitive psychology investigate mental functions and processes of human mind. These theories aim to explain how individuals learn and adapt to new environments and constraints, construct the world, and apply their knowledge. There exists two core ways that cognitivist theories differ from each other. One is that some models propose continuous changes in understanding while the others suggest stage-like changes. As stated in the above pages, this first point of difference is shared by many psychological theories that aim to explain processes of change. The second difference is that some emphasise personal and interpersonal experiences (e.g. moving around in the world, relationships with peers, etc.) while the others highlight biological maturation of certain mental capacities. Cognitivist approaches claim that a few rudimentary perceptual abilities – such as the ability to distinguish figures

from the ground – are inborn, but beyond these, the bulk of perceptual development is founded in the interaction between action and experience in the world. Thus, interactive experiences help to construct our understanding of the world, space, time, and so forth. Perhaps one important claim all constructivists have is that humans have the ability and power in deciding how to construct their understanding. In other words, they do not passively process whatever information and opportunity they are being provided, but instead, they direct and attend their own perceptions with a purpose, which is to understand the reasons behind their observations.

In terms of radicalisation literature, what endpoint forms the focus of analysis has important implications for the study of cognitive radicalisation. What changes happen in the way individuals think that we might consider important to track down in radicalisation process? First of all, we must remember that cognitivists must believe that all action – moderate, angry, very angry and even violent – is the product of reasoning. Accordingly, what people do and how they express their thoughts may be used as important sources of information for researchers to examine cognitive processes of radicalisation. Once we accept radicalisation as a way to express one's views (Kaya, 2020), we start arguing that freedom of speech is absolute and that individuals can express their views, even violence, as long as they do so by peaceful means. Such Anglo-Saxon approach, as Neumann (2013) argues, does not see extremist beliefs as the endpoint or as being problematic. The endpoint, then, would be any perception or belief that would indicate a way of thinking that is more distinct than the rest. For instance, an argument against democratic principles in a democratic society is neither violent nor forbidden but could indicate a form of radicalisation. There exists a disagreement whether it is thought or behaviour that constitutes a threat, and whether non-violent radicalism is, or is not, a threat (Sedgwick, 2010). A cognitivist, then must decide what constitutes as distinct way of thinking or action that might affect others negatively and then search for contributing factors (e.g. age, gender, religious beliefs, ideologies, etc). In reality, however, this paper observed that many psychologists who approached the topic of radicalisation from cognitive perspective consider radicalisation as a process that leads to violent behaviour which then needs to be combatted. The current literature tends to criminalise or pathologize political beliefs or dissent, even though freedom of thought is considered to be an inviolable human right in democratic and pluralistic contexts (da Silva et al., 2019). The endpoint, the last stage of the thinking process, is considered as the very last rationale behind the violent behaviour. Thus, it is safe to say that the existing literature does not seem very open-minded about accepting radicalisation as a way of thinking despite the very thing that it studies: how mind works.

Among many topics such as memory, language, attention; perception and beliefs have received the most consideration among the psychologists who study radicalisation from a cognitive perspective. In a review conducted by Van den Bos (2020), experienced group deprivation and perceived immorality appear as the fundamental elements that can drive Muslim, right-wing, or left-wing radicalisation. Perceiving that things are fundamentally unfair involves a threat to the worldviews of most people (Van den Bos & Miedema, 2000). These perceptions can lead to intense emotions and to what psychologists call “hot cognition” (Kunda, 1999), a combination of cognitive perceptions and emotional responses that can impact the radicalisation process (Van den Bos, 2018). Individuals’ perception of unfairness is believed to be related to three psychological functions: 1) individual’s self-esteem, 2) group identification, 3) ideology and religion. Self-esteem that is fragile or implicitly low is known to be associated with rigid thinking (Jordan et al. 2005) and various forms of defensive behaviour aimed at bolstering self-worth through compensatory efforts (Pyszczynski et al. 2003, 2004). When the feelings of being part of a special group are coupled with the perception that one’s group has been treated unfairly, this can lead to the impression that the situation is dire and that the group and its cause are vulnerable and in danger of extinction (McCauley & Moskaleiko 2008).

Repeated exposure to symbols of injustice (flags, banners, iconic photographs, etc), and the experience of unfair treatment can also increase radicalisation. For example, symbols, memories, and myths are key in perceiving injustices and led to radicalisation among North-African Muslims living in Britain (Githens-Mazer 2008). This is because these stimuli communicate a history that recognizes past injustices committed against the group with which one identifies and reminds the individual unfair treatments conducted by the majority group. The symbols also connect those past injustices with current perception of deprivation and other current forms of injustice (Van den Bos et al., 2009).

In trying to understand important components of the psychology of radicalisation and the steps the thinking process takes, some claim that rigid thinking and certain beliefs appear important among radicalized individuals. Rigid thinking and personal beliefs may function to safeguard radicalizing individuals from information they do not want to hear (Rokeach, 1960) and the need to understand things might lead them to engage in illusions of knowing (Fernbach et al., 2013) because it might lead them to construct meaning and plan their behaviours in persistent ways (Kay et al., 2014).

Rigidity of thoughts and beliefs can also predict dogmatic intolerance, that is, the tendency to reject and consider as inferior any ideological belief that differs from one’s own (Van Prooijen & Krouwel 2017). High levels of dogmatic intolerance have been observed among both left-wing and right-wing extremists (Van Prooijen & Krouwel 2017). In the meantime, the evidence seems to suggest that

cognitive disclosure and support for authoritarianism is more common among right-wing individuals than left-wing ones (Jost et al., 2003). Dogmatic intolerance was also associated with willingness to protest, denial of free speech, and support for antisocial behaviour. This suggests that both left-wing and right-wing extremist views can predict dogmatic intolerance (Greenberg & Jonas 2003). Consistent with this, in a large cross-cultural sample, Hansen and Norenzayan (2006) found that the conviction that one's beliefs are the only true ones strongly predicted intolerance of other religious groups but having religious beliefs per se did not.

Behaviourist (Learning) Approach

Behaviourism is grounded on the idea that psychology could become just as scientific as physics, chemistry, and other hard sciences by ignoring the subjective reports of conscious experience and focusing on observable (and sometimes unobservable, such as thoughts and feelings) behaviour. For traditional behaviourist, the human mind is a *black box*: we know what goes in and what comes out of it, but we do not need to be concerned about the relationship between the inputs and outputs. Based on this claim, any behaviour can be taught to an individual. In fact, Watson (1878-1958) has stated that he could teach a person to be a thief, a doctor, or a farmer by using the basic principles of learning such as rewarding, reinforcing, etc. Using the same learning principles, behaviourists also claim that a person can unlearn existing behaviours. This approach offers no space for agency of individuals but only accounts for factors that “force” them to push toward or withdraw from a behaviour. A behaviourist must believe that all action – moderate, angry, very angry and even violent – is the product of outside forces (e.g. rewards, punishments, etc).

Behaviourists, certainly helped to place psychology on firmer scientific footing by promising that change in behaviour can be modified and therefore, has very much influenced educational and intervention policies historically, throughout the world. Scholars who support a more deterministic and behaviourist approach claim that radicalisation and deradicalisation are mirror images of each other, and the processes that support deradicalisation reverse those that promote radicalisation (see, Kruglanski, et al., 2014). Although this position was challenged in the literature (e.g. Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2018; Horgan, 2009), it is no wonder that deradicalisation programs are all based on the behaviourist approach, which aim to decrease individuals' commitment to ideological goals and pursue alternative objectives to the ones they have learned previously. Not only does such “*evidence-based*” programs might close the space for important debates about issues which are causing understandable frustration among radicalized

individuals, but it also means that authorities tend to respond only to those deemed moderate voices or the usual suspects (Briggs, Fieschi & Lownsbrough, 2006).

More up to date thoughts on behaviourism argue that individuals participate in the development of personal knowledge and that learning is a dynamic process of interpretation, integration, and transformation of personal experiences (e.g. Transformative Learning Theory). What's relevant for this review is the radicalisation process that is necessarily associated with changes in behaviour and the factors that relate to those changes.

Research in psychology has long established that attitudes do not easily translate to behaviours. In a review of literature on the relationship between attitude and behaviour, Wicker (1969) noted, "Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that it is considerably more likely that attitudes will be unrelated or only slightly related to overt behaviours than that attitudes will be closely related to actions" (p. 65). The weak relation between attitude and behaviour is especially evident with attitudes relating to rare behaviours. For instance, most people have homicidal thoughts at some point in their lives, yet, only a small minority ever act on these thoughts (Duntley, 2005). Likewise, anger about group discrimination rarely translates into protests (Klandermans, 1997). Similarly, radicalisation to violent opinions is psychologically a different phenomenon from radicalisation to violent action. As Borum (2011: 30) has argued, "Radicalisation—the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs—needs to be distinguished from action pathways—the process of engaging in terrorism or violent extremist actions."

Bringing both the cognitivist and behaviourist approaches, McCauley and Moskaleiko (2017) offer the two pyramids model. Consistent with research on attitude and behaviour, the two pyramids model of radicalisations represent radicalisation of opinion separately from radicalisation of action (Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskaleiko, & McCauley, 2010; McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2014).

The opinion pyramid (Figure 1) represents the stages one goes through when becoming radicalized cognitively. At the base of the pyramid are individuals with no interest in politics (*neutral*); higher are those who have political interest and cause but do not find violence as a legitimate method to reach the political goals (*sympathizers*); higher are those who justify violence for political cause (*justifiers*); and at the apex of the pyramid are those who feel *a personal moral obligation* to take up violence for the cause.

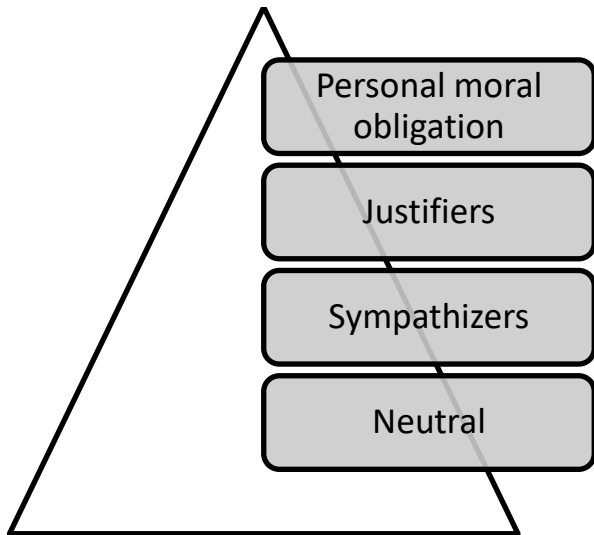


Figure 1 Opinion Pyramid

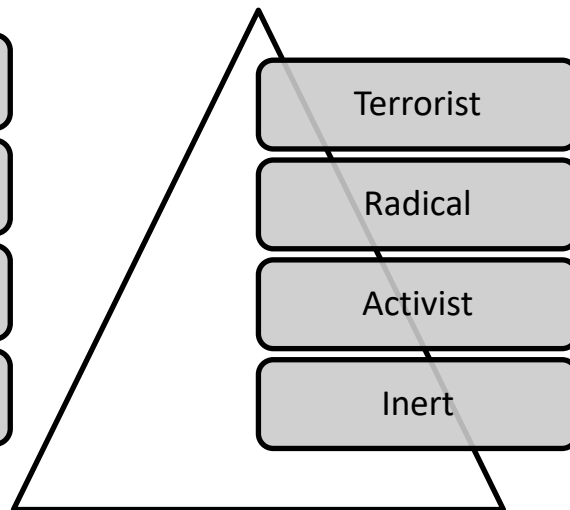


Figure 2 Action Pyramid

The action pyramid (Figure 2) is what concerns the behaviourist approach. At the base of this pyramid are individuals doing nothing for a political group or cause (*inert*); higher are those who are engaged in legal political action for the cause (*activists*); higher yet are those engaged in illegal action for the cause (*radicals*); and at the apex of the pyramid are those engaged in illegal action that targets civilians (*terrorists*).

According to McCauley and Moskaleiko (2017), an individual following the pathways in the two pyramids can skip levels in moving up and down during the process of being radicalised. In other words, this theory is designed as a non-stage theory. The two-pyramids model assumes that 99% of those with radical ideas never act. Conversely, many join in radical action without having radical ideas. They suggest that four individual-level mechanisms (love, risk and status, slippery slope, and unfreezing) and three group-level mechanisms (polarization, competition, and isolation and threat) can bring radical action in the absence of radical ideas (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2011).

The major implication of this approach is that we need to distinguish between the psychological factors leading to *radicalisation of opinions* from those leading to *radicalisation of action*. This focus on the operationalisation of the central concept and a standardised measure of activism and radicalism assures a strong measure of validity. Furthermore, it is well-supported that emotional reactions play a role in radicalisation to action (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2017). Past research has shown that while anger was positively related to legal protest and activism, having experienced contempt was positively related to radical action (Becker, Tausch, & Wagner, 2011). Emotions appear to be as central to

motivating political behaviour as any other factor and present an avenue for future empirical research (e.g. Bal & van den Bos, 2017; Van Stekelenburg, 2017).

Socio-Cultural Approach

Overall, it seems that it took a while for psychologists to study processes of change in context. Fortunately, with emphasis on different practices in different cultures, a necessity to understand human psychology in context has emerged, moved the discipline to away from general models (Strickland, 2000), and brought the appearance of second psychology (Cahan and White, 1992). According to this wave, human psychology can be explained only in terms of its social, historical, and cultural context. Human mind is not inside the skull anymore, and it could be understood by looking at its involvement in the world.

The cutting edge of contemporary scholarship in psychology is attempting to integrate information from several levels of organization involved in the ecology of human experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Such an approach points to the fact that it is essential to consider the physical and social environment within which changes occur (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). What is the basic and perhaps most important component of environment so we can understand whether it is optimal for a particular developmental asset or not? Culture. In its most general sense, the term culture refers to “an adaptive process that accumulates the partial solutions to frequently encountered problems... It is the process in which our everyday cultural practices are enacted.” (Hutchins, 1995:354). From this definition, we can conclude that culture does not simply provide isolated norms, standards, values, or codes that are stabilized. It forms integrated patterns that make the job of a researcher almost impossible to document of its variations. Moreover, it is fundamental that we consider that human activity involves complex and shifting divisions of experience within cultures. As a result, no two members of a cultural group or no people experiencing the same context can be expected to attribute the same meaning to the experience. What psychology can do is to conduct cross-cultural studies, which can help us study patterns and determine the ideal environment in the variations of experiences. However, it is important to not focus on cross-cultural variations in the products but understand the role of culture in the process of change (Cole, 1995). Besides, it is also important to note that “our times” and “our contexts” should not necessarily be the case for every human being in the world. Therefore, making conclusions about general human psychology from the studies solely conducted in Western societies in “optimal” environments (Rogoff, 2003) are not enough for us to enhance our knowledge. History, philosophy,

politics and economics also have major influence on the ways individuals experience processes of change. Socio-cultural approach, therefore, claims that there is no such thing as a unique, inevitable or desirable endpoint of cognitive, behavioural or emotional change for every culture, every context, and for every individual.

Some scholars acknowledge that pathways into radicalisation are multilevel and involve layers of factors, including intra-individual, community-based and contextual with global ideological forces (e.g., Ferguson & Binks, 2015, Ferguson & McAuley, 2019; Ranstorp, 2016). In addition, while many radicalized individuals share similar experiences, there exist research accounts that show no direct link between becoming ideologically and politically radicalised and engaging in extremist violence (e.g. Della Porta & La Free, 2012; Ferguson & McAuley; 2019). Such accounts that challenge the previously confirmed constructs must urge researchers to forego positivistic and normative claims. Twenty-first century psychology requires critical thinking about the discipline's foundations, along with a robust and sensitive analysis of how individuals in different contexts experience the radicalisation process.

Jensen et al. (2016) compiled 70 factors that were found to be associated with radicalisation process in the past. Called as antecedent factors for radicalisation, they ranged from intrapersonal to group-level factors (Jensen et al., 2016). The analysis of 500 possible combinations of 70 causal mechanisms revealed that having a sense of belonging to a community that has been collectively victimized is key to setting the contextual environment for radicalisation to be possible. Mind the wording, the finding is far removed from any deterministic claim. Rather, it emphasises the potential vulnerabilities perceived and shared by a group of community have in creating a context for radical individuals.

The importance of a comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach for the study of radicalisation is also crucial for the implications the research might have in integration efforts. To date, research-led and government-led initiatives address the challenge of integration through a combination of education, training, cultural and religious dialogue that help members of small communities to integrate into majority societies. A research or government-led initiative that is deaf to the socio-cultural norms and the local economic and political realities not only have little chance to be accepted by individuals who already have high perception of grievance but also might widen the trust gap between those individuals and authorities. Therefore, a socio-cultural approach might also have a lot to offer to those who plan to move beyond understanding radicalisation process in a unique context and study patterns of differences and similarities with others who share similar characteristics.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to note that the current literature on radicalisation is very difficult to comprehend for several reasons. It is this paper's claim that the biggest reason is the wide range of disciplines that have studied the topic, which makes it difficult for one to approach the concept with a specialized focus. Even if one searches articles with a focus on Psychology, it is inevitable to review and include writings from different fields, focusing on different aspects of radicalisation, using variations of definitions and perspectives from, again, different fields. There are a vast number of theories written and formulated specifically about radicalisation but the confusion about what it means to be radicalised persist in the literature. Second, people radicalize about different issues in different ways and variation. However, it is very difficult to decide what appears to indicate a form of radicalisation and it is often not possible to examine the radicalisation process of an individual overtime. This difficulty results with many conceptual models that keep appearing in literature with little to no cross-sectional or longitudinal findings, which would be useful to document processes of radicalisation.

It is this paper's claim that such difficulty can be overcome with using the very core, field-specific theoretical constructions that existed before the term radicalisation was politicized and Westernized. For instance, if a psychologist believes that environment one lives in has the utmost impact on them exhibiting unwanted behaviours and thoughts, they would be expected to recommend ways for society to prevent such unwanted behaviours and thoughts. If a psychologist approaches the concept of radicalisation with internationally and culturally sensitive lenses, they would gather as much information as possible about the context their research participants are situated in. In sum, a theoretical position need to be taken before formulating a hypothesis and designing a research study. Perhaps that is the most important conclusion that can be drawn from this paper.

References

- Adorno, T., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D., & Sanford, N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Bal, M., & Van Den Bos, K. (2017). From system acceptance to embracing alternative systems and system rejection: Tipping points in processes of radicalisation. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, 3(3), 241.
- Becker, J. C., Tausch, N., & Wagner, U. (2011). Emotional consequences of collective action participation: Differentiating self-directed and outgroup-directed emotions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37(12), 1587-1598.
- Bjørger, T., & Horgan, J. (Eds.). (2009). *Leaving terrorism behind. Individual and collective disengagement*. Abingdon, UK:Routledge.
- Borum, R. (2011). Radicalisation into violent extremism I: A review of social science theories. *Journal of strategic security*, 4(4), 7-36.
- Briggs, R., Fieschi, C., & Lownsbrough, H. (2006). *Bringing it Home. Community-based approaches to counter-terrorism*. London, Demos.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1995). Developmental ecology through space and time: A future perspective. In P. Moen, G. H. Elder, Jr., & K. Lüscher (Eds.), *Examining lives in context: Perspectives on the ecology of human development* (p. 619–647). American Psychological Association. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/10.1037/10176-018>
- Cahan, E. D., & White, S. H. (1992). Proposals for a second psychology. *American Psychologist*, 47(2), 224.
- Cohen, S. J. (2019). The unconscious in terror: An overview of psychoanalytic contributions to the psychology of terrorism and violent radicalisation. *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 16(4), 216-228.
- Cole, M. (1995). Socio-cultural-historical psychology: Some general remarks and a proposal for a new kind of cultural-genetic methodology. *Sociocultural studies of mind*, 187-214.
- d'Andrade, R. G. (1995). *The development of cognitive anthropology*. Cambridge University Press.
- da Silva, R., Fernández-Navarro, P., Gonçalves, M. M., Rosa, C., & Silva, J. (2019). Tracking narrative change in the context of extremism and terrorism: Adapting the Innovative Moments Coding System. *Aggression and violent behavior*.

-
- Della Porta, D., & LaFree, G. (2012). Guest editorial: Processes of radicalisation and deradicalisation. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence (IJCIV)*, 6(1), 4-10.
- Duntley, J. D., & Buss, D. M. (2005). The plausibility of adaptations for homicide. *The innate mind: Structure and contents*, 291-304.
- Ferguson, N., & Binks, E. (2015). Understanding radicalisation and engagement in terrorism through religious conversion motifs. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 8(1-2), 16-26.
- Ferguson, N., & McAuley, J. W. (2019). Radicalisation or Reaction: Understanding Engagement in Violent Extremism in Northern Ireland. *Political Psychology*.
- Ferguson, N., & McAuley, J. W. (2019). Staying Engaged in Terrorism: Narrative Accounts of Sustaining Participation in Violent Extremism. *Frontiers in Psychology*.
- Fernbach, P. M., Rogers, T., Fox, C. R., & Sloman, S. A. (2013). Political extremism is supported by an illusion of understanding. *Psychological science*, 24(6), 939-946.
- Fraihi, T. (2008). Escalating radicalisation: The debate within Muslim and immigrant communities. *Jihadi terrorism and the radicalisation challenge in Europe*. Hampshire: Ashgate.
- Githens-Mazer, J. (2008). Islamic Radicalisation among North Africans in Britain. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 10(4), 550-570.
- Gøtzsche-Astrup, O. (2018). The time for causal designs: Review and evaluation of empirical support for mechanisms of political radicalisation. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 39, 90-99.
- Greenberg, J., & Jonas, E. (2003). Psychological motives and political orientation: the left, the right, and the rigid—comment on Jost et al. (2003). *Psychological Bulletin*. 129:376–82.
- Hutchins, E. (1995). *Cognition in the Wild* (No. 1995). MIT press.
- Horgan, J. G. (2009). *Walking away from terrorism: Accounts of disengagement from radical and extremist movements*. Routledge.
- Jensen, M., LaFree, G., James, P. A., Atwell-Seate, A., Pisiou, A., Stevenson, J., & Tinsley, H. (2016). *Empirical Assessment of Domestic Radicalisation (EADR)*, final report to the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. College Park, MD: START.
- Jordan, C. H., Spencer, S. J., & Zanna, M. P. (2005). Types of high self-esteem and prejudice: How implicit self-esteem relates to ethnic discrimination among high explicit self-esteem individuals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(5), 693-702.
- Jost, J. T., Glaser, J., Kruglanski, A. W., & Sulloway, F. J. (2003). Political conservatism as motivated social cognition. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(3), 339.

-
- Kay, A. C., Laurin, K., Fitzsimons, G. M., & Landau, M. J. (2014). A functional basis for structure-seeking: Exposure to structure promotes willingness to engage in motivated action. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *143*(2), 486.
- Kaya, A. (2020, February 21). Extremism and Radicalisation: What makes the difference? [Blog Post]. Retrieved from <https://bpy.bilgi.edu.tr/en/blog/extremism-and-radicalisation-what-makes-difference/>
- Klandermans, P. G. (1997). *The social psychology of protest*. Blackwell: Oxford.
- Kristeva, J. (2018). *Cet incroyable besoin de croire*. Paris: Bayard Culture.
- Kruglanski, A. W., Bélanger, J. J., & Gunaratna, R. (2019). *The three pillars of radicalisation: Needs, narratives, and networks*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., Bélanger, J. J., Sheveland, A., Hetiarachchi, M., & Gunaratna, R. (2014). The psychology of radicalisation and deradicalisation: How significance quest impacts violent extremism. *Political Psychology*, *35*, 69-93.
- Kunda, Z. (1999). *Social Cognition: Making Sense of People*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Leuprecht, C., Hataley, T., Moskalenko, S., & McCauley, C. (2010). Containing the narrative: Strategy and tactics in countering the storyline of global jihad. *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, *5*(1), 42-57.
- Lifton, E. J. 2007. A clinical psychology perspective on radical Islamic youth. In *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Perspective*. Abbas T (ed.). Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh; 25-41.
- Lifton, R. J. (1961). *Thought, Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*. New York: Norton.
- McCauley, C., & Moskalenko, S. (2008). Mechanisms of political radicalisation: Pathways toward terrorism. *Terrorism and political violence*, *20*(3), 415-433.
- McCauley, C., & Moskalenko, S. (2014). Toward a profile of lone wolf terrorists: What moves an individual from radical opinion to radical action. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *26*(1), 69-85.
- McCauley, C., & Moskalenko, S. (2017). Understanding political radicalisation: The two-pyramids model. *American Psychologist*, *72*(3), 205.
- Moskalenko, S., & McCauley, C. (2011). The psychology of lone-wolf terrorism. *Counselling psychology quarterly*, *24*(2), 115-126.
- Neumann, P. R. (2013). Options and strategies for countering online radicalisation in the United States. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *36*(6), 431-459.

-
- Norenzayan, A., & Hansen, I. G. (2006). Belief in supernatural agents in the face of death. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32(2), 174-187.
- Poggie, G. 1965. A main theme of contemporary sociological analysis: Its achievements and limitations. *British Journal of Sociology*, 16: 283-294.
- Post, J.M. (1998). Terrorist psycho-logic: Terrorist behavior as a product of psychological forces. In W. Reich (Ed.), *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind* (pp. 24–40). Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- Pyszczynski, T.A., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Arndt, J., & Schimel, J. (2004). Why do people need self-esteem? A theoretical and empirical review. *Psychology Bulletin*. 130:435–68.
- Pyszczynski, T.A., Solomon, S., Greenberg, J. (2003). *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*. Washington, DC: American Psychology. Association.
- Ranstorp, M. (2016). The root causes of violent extremism. *RAN Issue paper*, 4.
- Rogers, M.B., Loewenthal, K.M., Lewis, C.A., Amlôt, R, Cinnirella, M. and Ansari, H. (2007). The role of religious fundamentalism in terrorist violence: A social psychological analysis. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 19 (3), 253–262.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. Oxford University Press. New York.
- Rokeach, M. (1960). *The open and closed mind: Investigations into the nature of belief systems and personality systems*.
- Sedgwick, M. (2010). The concept of radicalisation as a source of confusion. *Terrorism and political violence*, 22(4), 479-494.
- Silke, A. (1998). Cheshire-cat logic: The recurring theme of terrorist abnormality in psychological research. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, 4, 51–69.
- Silke, A. (2003). *Terrorists, Victims and Society: Psychological perspectives on terrorism and its consequences*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- Strenger, C. (2015). *Freud's legacy in the global era*. Routledge.
- Strickland, B. R. (2000). Misassumptions, misadventures, and the misuse of psychology. *American Psychologist*, 55(3), 331.
- Taylor, K. (2004). *Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control*. Oxford University Press.
- Van den Bos, K. (2009). Making sense of life: The existential self trying to deal with personal uncertainty. *Psychological Inquiry*, 20(4), 197-217.
- Van den Bos, K. (2018). *Why People Radicalize*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Van den Bos, K. (2020). Unfairness and radicalisation. *Annual review of psychology*, 71, 563-588.

-
- Van den Bos, K., & Miedema J. (2000). Toward understanding why fairness matters: the influence of mortality salience on reactions to procedural fairness. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 79:355–66.
- Van Prooijen, J. W., & Krouwel, A. P. (2017). Extreme political beliefs predict dogmatic intolerance. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 8(3), 292-300.
- Van Stekelenburg, J. (2017). Radicalisation and violent emotions. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 50(4), 936-939.
- Wicker, A. W. (1969). Attitudes versus actions: The relationship of verbal and overt behavioral responses to attitude objects. *Journal of Social issues*, 25(4), 41-78.
- Wilner, A. S., & Dubouloz, C. J. (2010). Homegrown terrorism and transformative learning: an interdisciplinary approach to understanding radicalisation. *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 22(1), 33-51.

FOLLOW US

on Social Media:



[@BilgiERC](https://twitter.com/BilgiERC)



[@BilgiERC](https://www.instagram.com/BilgiERC)



<https://bpy.bilgi.edu.tr/en/>

