



# The time for causal designs: Review and evaluation of empirical support for mechanisms of political radicalisation



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## ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the most influential current approaches to the mechanisms of radicalisation on the basis of their empirical evidence and calls for a focus on research designs capable of arbitrating on matters of causality, not just correlation. It shows how the existing evidence converges on a handful of factors involved in radicalisation, including negative life experiences leading to fundamental uncertainty or loss of significance, which spur on the search for and identity shift towards groups with strong norms and ideals, including sacred values that enable extreme ingroup defences (e.g. acts of terrorism). The cumulative empirical data indicates support for some, but not all, kinds of interventions. Finally, because both theoretical approaches and current interventions propose cause-and-effect relationships, the paper argues that it is imperative that the field shifts its focus to experimental research designs capable of making causal inferences.

## 1. Introduction

How individuals, often young people, come to accept the use of violence as a legitimate means to achieve political change has emerged as one of the most pertinent questions for policymakers and social scientists in the last decade. The consequences of this radicalisation are often devastating, both in terms of specific acts of violence and the fallout from these events. Our explicit and implicit theories of the mechanisms of this process matter, because interventions - also those targeting the community or societal level - work (or do not) through individual psychological mechanisms (Webber & Kruglanski, 2018). Interventions that explicitly target radicalisation to political violence include programmes as diverse as mentoring and coaching, dialogical workshops, exit programmes, community outreach and collaboration and punitive measures (Romaniuk, 2015). However, the proposed mechanisms through which these programmes are supposed to work are often vague or rest on untested assumptions (Horgan, 2016; Thomas, McGarty, & Louis, 2014) despite the fact that “getting it wrong” can have dramatic iatrogenic effects and possibly contribute to further radicalisation (Lindekilde, 2012). As models of radicalisation and the interventions based on these models make claims of relationships in the “real world”, we must evaluate these models based on their empirical support. In this paper, I review and evaluate the most prominent psychological theories of political radicalisation on their empirical merits. I argue that current evidence indicates support for a handful of central factors and mechanisms that should not be neglected when designing interventions targeting groups and individuals at risk of

political radicalisation.

The following section presents and evaluates the empirical evidence for the most impactful psychological approaches of the last decade. As the goal of reviews should not merely be to create a list of relevant factors, but actively synthesize our current knowledge (Borum, 2015), the paper goes on to discuss similarities and disparities in the different theories with a synthesis and ranking of the supported mechanisms. These mechanisms are then used to evaluate central kinds of interventions that exist in current policies across the world, illustrating the usefulness of this kind of research. The paper concludes with a call for a new research focus, one that employs research designs that can arbitrate on matters of causality, not merely correlation. Pre-empting the following review, the central seven approaches presented below are summarised in Table 1, which provides an overview of the central tenets, conceptualisation of radicalisation, proposed explanatory factors, as well as a comparative evaluation of the empirical evidence in support of the internal validity (causal connection), external validity (generalisability) and measurement validity of the approaches.

## 2. Reviewing the literature

In a 2008 paper, Andrew Silke lamented the fact that only a fifth of all papers in the research field of the psychology of radicalisation presented new, original data; and that of the empirical papers that did exist, most were based on “pre-experimental research designs”, which are primarily useful for exploratory research (Silke, 2008). Almost a decade later, this has begun to change (Borum, 2014; Horgan, 2016),

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**Table 1**  
Seven approaches to the psychological mechanisms of radicalisation.

Theory	Central papers	Central tenets	Dependent variable	Explanatory variable(s)	Support - internal validity	Support - external validity	Support - measurement validity
Uncertainty-Identity Theory	Hogg & Adelman (2013)	Motivational and social identity theory	Joining and supporting radical groups Autocratic leadership Behavioural aggression and hostility	Self-uncertainty Group entitativity Social identity complexity Peripheral membership	Strong	Moderate	Area of focus
Significance Quest/"3N"	Webber & Kruglanski (2018)	Social psychological motivational theory	Coming to see as socially normative violent behaviour that is deviant from the majority perspective	Need for significance Narratives legitimising violence	Area of focus	Strong	Moderate
Devoted Actor Model	Atran (2016)	Ideology, values	Unconditional commitment, sacrifice and willingness to engage in extreme behaviour for a group	Networks and groups Sacred values Identity fusion	Moderate	Strong	Moderate
Mindset and Worldview	Borum (2014)	Distinction between mindset factors and worldview factors	Psychological "climate" that increases the risk of involvement in violent extremism	Psychological mindset: authoritarianism	Area of focus	Area of focus	Area of focus
Reactive Approach Motivation	McGregor, Hayes, & Prentice (2015)	Motivational framework encompassing personality and social dynamics	Aggressive religious radicalisation	Motivational processes diverted through interaction between personality, threats and group affordances	Area of focus	Moderate	Moderate
Two-pyramid approach	McCauley & Moskalenko (2017)	Distinguishing opinion and action	Radical opinion (support) and radical action (behavioural intentions)	Individual factors Group factors Mass factors	Area of focus	Moderate	Strong

and the premise of this paper is that the field has matured to allow for a focus on evaluating theories on their empirical merits. A range of quantitative, large-n studies have emerged, implying that the reliance on qualitative case studies without control can be lessened, which allows for a renewed focus on questions of causal factors of radicalisation rather than mere correlates or indicators. This is not to say that excellent case studies do not exist, but rather that they are better at building theory than evaluating hypotheses, which is the focus of this paper. In the last couple of years, reviews have focused on collecting the theoretical psychological factors involved in radicalisation. To this author's knowledge, however, no review has yet evaluated these factors on the merit of the strength of their empirical evidence rather than their theoretical merits. A central point in the review relates to the concept of radicalisation itself. Gaining traction in the political and academic worlds since the so-called 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, it has received its share of criticism (Schmid, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010). On the one hand, this means that it is essential to be crystal clear in terms of what definitions are used. In what follows, it will become apparent that the phenomenon under scrutiny differs according to which approach is taken. On the other hand, and as shown in this paper, the concept of radicalisation as more than "what goes on before the bomb goes off" (Neumann, 2008, p. 4) has enabled a common language for talking about specific processes, facilitating research that can be tentatively characterised as cumulative.

2.1. Inclusion criteria and approach

The search strategy proceeded in a two stages. First, a review of seven specialised journals (*Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Aggression and Violent Behavior, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Political Psychology, Terrorism and Political Violence, Journal of Conflict Resolution, and Aggressive Behavior*) was carried out to identify influential theoretical approaches. A particular approach was selected for inclusion if it had recent (within the past six years) empirical studies, if it claimed to provide a framework for understanding radicalisation, and if it explicated individual-level psychological factors. Second, a ProQuest search of PsycINFO, PsycArticles, Worldwide Political Science Abstracts and Research Library: Social Sciences was carried out to identify approaches not included in the first narrative stage. Only peer-reviewed papers published in journals after 2013 were included in the search, as the focus of the review is on theoretical approaches empirical studies published within the past six years. Boolean operators and search terms were ab(radical\*) AND ab(psycholog\*) AND ab(mechanism\*) AND ab(violen\*) AND ab(politic\*) AND peer(yes). The resulting 1280 results were screened on the basis of title and abstract. An article was selected for inclusion if it proceeded from a theoretical framework for understanding radicalisation, if it was empirically based, and if it explicated individual-level psychological factors. The second stage of the search consisted of reviewing the identified articles to assess approaches for inclusion in the present review. In the end, seven theoretical approaches were left to be reviewed.

2.2. The framework of the review

In the evaluation of the empirical evidence for the approaches outlined below, this paper uses the understanding of causality described in the *potential outcomes framework* (Holland, 1986). Causality is understood as the differences in potential outcomes on some factor of interest of a unit in the presence and absence of another factor, often called the treatment. While the causal effect of any factor is fundamentally unobservable due to us viewing each unit only in a single state, the average causal effect can be teased out through the comparison of units who received the treatment and others that were similar except for the fact that they did not receive the treatment. This borrows language from an experimental framework of treatment and control, but while ethical issues abound in talking about "randomisation" to

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