Review / Meta-analyses

Who are the European youths willing to engage in radicalisation? A multidisciplinary review of their psychological and social profiles

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Background: A new model of radicalisation has appeared in Western countries since the 2010s. Radical groups are smaller, less hierarchical and are mainly composed of young, homegrown individuals. The aim of this review is to decipher the profiles of the European adolescents and young adults who have embraced the cause of radical Islamism and to define the role of psychiatry in dealing with this issue.
Methods: We performed a systematic search in several databases from January 2010 to July 2017 and reviewed the relevant studies that included European adolescents and/or young adults and presented empirical data.
Results: In total, 22 qualitative and quantitative studies were reviewed from various fields and using different methodologies. Psychotic disorders are rare among radicalised youths. However, they show numerous risk factors common with adolescent psychopathologies. We develop a comprehensive three-level model to explain the phenomenon of radicalisation among young Europeans: (1) individual risk factors include psychological vulnerabilities such as early experiences of abandonment, perceived injustice and personal uncertainty; (2) micro-environmental risk factors include family dysfunction and friendships with radicalised individuals; (3) societal risk factors include geopolitical events and societal changes such as Durkheim's concept of anomie. Some systemic factors are also implicated as there is a specific encounter between recruiters and the individual. The former use sectarian techniques to isolate and dehumanise the latter and to offer him a new societal model.
Conclusion: There are many similarities between psychopathological manifestations of adolescence and mechanisms at stake during the radicalisation process. As a consequence, and despite the rarity of psychotic disorders, mental health professionals have a role to play in the treatment and understanding of radical engagement among European youth. Studies with empirical data are limited, and more research should be promoted (in particular in females and in non-Muslim communities) to better understand the phenomenon and to propose recommendations for prevention and treatment.

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1. Introduction

The terrorism threat level in Europe is critical [1,2]. Terrorism is defined as the use of intentionally indiscriminate violence as a means to create terror, or fear, to achieve a political, religious or ideological aim [3]. The concept of radicalisation differs, as there is a temporal dimension: it is a process that may lead to terrorist actions. For Khosrokhavar, radicalisation is a '*process by which an individual or group adopts a violent form of action, directly linked to an extremist ideology with a social or religious political content that undermines the established political, social or cultural order*' [4]. Beyond the repressive and security apparatus, many professionals and researchers from the fields of anthropology, political science, sociology, psychology and psychiatry have been involved in understanding terrorism and radicalisation.

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Attempts to explain terrorism have explored the links among Islamism, the Muslim religion, delinquency and immigration. Sageman, a psychiatrist working for the Central Intelligence Agency, showed that terrorists are educated and mostly from the upper or middle classes [5]. Several literature reviews have confirmed that there is no predefined pathway leading to radicalisation: radicalised individuals come from various backgrounds, have different origins, different family beliefs, social status or gender [6–9]. The pyramidal model of radicalisation has been widely developed. This model emphasises the idea that only a few individuals would be likely to commit a violent act after undergoing a whole step-by-step process [10–14].

However, various authors have highlighted the difference between radicalised individuals who commit violent actions within a radical group (through a maturation process such as the pyramidal model) and individuals – the 'lone wolves'- who act in a more isolated manner, who are radicalised more quickly and for whom the pyramidal model does not apply [7,15,16]. The latter represent only a minority of the individuals involved in terrorist activities and are more likely to suffer from psychiatric pathologies [7]. Sageman reported no indicators of mental illness among the terrorists he studied [5]. One may wonder why certain individuals are more likely than others to go through the different steps of the pyramidal model process of radicalisation. Some authors have put forward various predisposing factors, such as depressive tendencies or suicidal thoughts [17–19]. The feeling of injustice or humiliation has been also highlighted [20]. Others insist on notions of identity and belonging, emphasising that being part of a radical group and embracing a cause gives a comforting sense of a 'significance quest' around a dedication that has an 'empowerment effect' for the radicalised individual [8,21,22]. Moments of 'existential fragilities' have also been mentioned as elements of vulnerability that can foster radical commitment [23]. Moghaddam noted the importance of the radical group effect, together with the major influence of leaders on the individual throughout the radicalisation process [13]. Literature reviews suggest that the environmental, political, religious, social and cultural context plays an important role, making it difficult to compare the phenomenon of radicalisation from one context to another [8,14].

The studies mentioned above focus on terrorist movements of the 1990s (i.e., Al-Qaida [5,22], terrorism in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict [17,20]) in which terrorists target a foreign country or are fighting for national liberation. However, the understanding of terrorist acts has changed in recent years in Europe with the emergence of 'homegrown' terrorists, born and raised in Europe, who adopt the ideology of violent radical Islamism. The recruitment methods and the methods of action have changed and given rise to new models of radicalisation. Various political scientists, sociologists and governments have made this observation. According to Sageman, the increasing use of the Internet by jihadist movements since the 2000s has led to an organisational change: today's radical groups are less organised and less centralised compared to previous hierarchical organisations such as Al-Qaida. Khosrokhavar also asserts that a new model of radicalisation has appeared in Western countries since the 2010s that is different from the pyramidal model. This new model has the following characteristics: the groups are smaller (three individuals, on average), more discrete (less proselytic), younger, and composed of more-fragile individuals who have been influenced by recruiters. Although the number of radicalised individuals remains marginal at the level of the general population, it has greatly increased since 2014 under the influence of Islamic State (IS) propaganda. In July 2014, the French Ministry of the Interior services listed 899 French people who either joined IS in Syria, returned from Syria, were on their way to Syria or said they wanted to join IS. An increase of 58% in six months was observed between January 2014 and July 2014 [24]. In August 2016, 364 minors were registered with the French judiciary authorities by the police because of objective and worrying signs evoking a radicalisation process [25].

Existing literature reviews on radicalisation have mainly focused on adults and have scarcely explored the question of radicalised adolescents. However, since 2010, it appears that radicalised individuals in Europe are younger than they used to be (often teenagers) and that the number of young women involved is increasing [4]. How do these young people shift from a symbolic affiliation with a European country to an organisation that was originally foreign to themselves and that advocates hatred and destruction of the environment in which they grew up? We formulate the hypothesis that there are similarities between the mechanisms at stake during the radicalisation process and the psychopathological manifestations of adolescence: the attraction towards an ideal place and the rejection of their symbolic affiliation could be reflected in the issues of separation and individuation that occur during adolescence and young adulthood.

In this systematic literature review, we focused on understanding the profiles of the European adolescents and young adults who have embraced the cause of radical Islamism since the beginning of the 2010s. Various organisations have observed that the profiles of the radicalised have changed since 2010 in Europe, and this new context deserves to be examined. We searched relevant data from medical and psychological search engines and obtained articles from various fields: psychological, sociological, educational, medical and anthropological. We chose to perform a multidisciplinary review, having noted in the scientific debates that each researcher tends to reduce the comprehension of this phenomenon towards his field of knowledge thus providing an incomplete panorama of the phenomenon. This broad approach aims to make a comprehensive inventory in order to return afterwards to a more specific psychiatric or psychological approach.

2. Methods

We performed a search in the PubMed, PsycINFO and Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection databases from January 2010 to July 2017. All papers containing the terms 'Radicali*' or 'Terror*' or 'Violent Protest' in the abstract AND 'Adolescen*' or 'Juvenil*' or 'Teen*' or 'Youth' or 'Young People' or 'Young Person' in the text were identified. Moreover, the French database from the MIVILUDES (Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires for Inter-ministry mission of vigilance and fight against sectarian activities) was screened in order to identify relevant French articles on radicalisation. Because of its experience with sectarian hold, the MIVILUDES was one of the first governmental organisations commissioned to study radicalisation in France, and it played a pioneering role in this field of research.

For the selection of the relevant studies, we used the following criteria: (i) the study population included adolescents and/or young adults: subjects aged between 12 and 25 at the time of the radical engagement; (ii) the subjects lived in a Western European country: the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence showed that the majority of the youth who left for Syria and Irak since 2013 came from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands or Great-Britain [26] (iii) the study was about radicalisation at large; (iv) the study included empirical data and not only theoretical information or views; (v) the study was recent (2010–2017). The PRISMA diagram flow (Fig. 1) maps out the number of records identified, included and excluded, and the reasons for exclusion through the different phases of the selection process. Of the selected studies, two co-authors (NC and AO) selected the relevant information independently: authors