REVISITING THEORIES AND BUILDING A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA FOR EXPLAINING RADICALIZATION

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Abstract:

Over recent decades, radicalization, particularly when it leads to violence, has become a critical focus for national and international security agendas and research fields. This article revisits foundational social, psychological, socio-psychological, and psychiatric theories of radicalization, aiming to provide a comprehensive overview of their development and current relevance. Although numerous theories emerged prior to pivotal events such as the September 11, 2001 attacks, this study demonstrates how these perspectives have evolved to address both individual and group-level processes. The discussion synthesizes key aspects of radicalization dynamics, including personal identity crises, psychological vulnerability, group dynamics, and societal influences, highlighting the role of modern digital networks in fostering extremist ideologies. The article concludes with recommendations for refining theoretical approaches and expanding research to encompass emerging influences, such as online communities and familial factors, in the radicalization process.

Keywords: *radicalization, theories of radicalization, terrorism, social teories, psychological theories, socio-psychological theories, psychiatric theories.*

The Need for Revisiting Radicalization: Bridging Past Theories with Emerging Realities

The phenomenon of radicalization, particularly in its violent manifestations, has garnered heightened attention from policymakers, security agencies and researchers globally. In the years following the 11 September 2001 attacks, radicalization has evolved as a primary concern for both national and international security, with a proliferation

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of studies aiming to unravel the complexities behind extremist ideologies and behaviours. While early theories on radicalization emerged well before these events, the intensified focus on terrorism has prompted a reassessment and expansion of classical theories to better address modern forms of radicalization, which are increasingly complex and multi-faceted.

Radicalization is a complex process whereby individuals or groups adopt extreme beliefs, ideologies and behaviours, which may include the justification of violence to achieve political, religious or social goals. Unlike other forms of violence, such as interpersonal violence or crime, radicalization is characterized by an ideological or political motivation, often being perceived as part of a collective project or a "noble" cause. Likewise, radicalization involves a gradual process, through which initial attitudes or grievances gradually evolve into extremist positions that legitimize the use of violence. The boundary between radicalization and other forms of social or political expression is one of stability and depends on factors such as the difficulty of the intention to justify violence, the degree of extremism of the adopted ideologies and their impact on public order and security. Therefore, radicalization becomes visible and problematic when the behaviours or attitudes manifested threaten socio-political stability and promote intolerance or violent confrontation. It is very difficult to establish the limit from which a certain behaviour/attitudes, in a specific socio-political context, can be considered/labelled as radicalization because sometimes even the legislation itself cannot establish this limit. One criterion would be the impact on national security[1]. Often, the context and way events unfold is so rapid that legislation lags behind.

The need to revisit radicalization theories stems from the rapidly evolving nature of extremist ideologies and the digital landscapes that amplify them. While foundational perspectives provided valuable insights

[1] For instance, in July 2023 the far-right group Danish Patriots burned a Koran in front of the Iraqi embassy in Copenhagen and online, prompting similar acts in Stockholm, Sweden (BBC News, 2023). Acts of destruction of the Koran in Denmark by far-right and anti-Islam militants in 2023 led to al-Qaeda calls for terrorist attacks in Denmark. A consequence was the adoption of the Danish law criminalizing the public desecration of the holy texts of the religions recognized by the Danish state, including Islam (Szumski, 2024).

into psychological, social, and psychiatric factors influencing radicalization, today's interconnected world calls for a reassessment to address new, complex pathways to extremism. This modern context requires a nuanced understanding that can only be achieved by bridging established theories with recent developments in group dynamics, identity crises, and online radicalization.

This article re-evaluates foundational theories from social, psychological, socio-psychological and psychiatric perspectives, each providing distinct yet intersecting insights into the motivations and pathways leading individuals toward extremist ideologies. Notably, traditional approaches focused on isolated psychological traits or deviant behaviour have gradually expanded to encompass social influences, group dynamics, and the role of identity crises in facilitating radicalization. More recent theories have also highlighted the influence of social networks, both offline and online, in shaping and amplifying radical ideologies, underscoring the need to account for how digital spaces foster and reinforce extremist communities.

It is less about an internal transformation of these theories and more about the analysis of the opportunity for a prospective change, considering the evolution of radicalization in relation to the new context. For example, it should be analysed whether classic theories from the social, psychological, socio-psychological and psychiatric fields, which were valid in the context of traditional radicalization, remain equally applicable nowadays, when interactions are digitized and gamification can work as a facilitating factor, increasing susceptibility to radicalization. The theories discussed in the article mostly refer to offline radicalization processes. The main question that fuelled this article is whether these theories retain their validity in the context of online radicalization, whether intra-psychic processes are similar to offline radicalization, and whether social theories can be applied to digitally mediated interactions. In case of an affirmative answer, we will analyse whether these theories retain their original form in which they were conceived or not.

By examining theories of radicalization across individual and group levels, this study aims to provide a comprehensive synthesis of how these frameworks contribute to our understanding of radicalization in contemporary contexts. Through this analysis, the article addresses

gaps in existing theories, suggesting the need for nuanced research on underexplored areas, such as the impact of familial relationships and online communities. Ultimately, this approach underscores the importance of evolving theoretical models to reflect the dynamic landscape of radicalization, which is shaped by both psychological undercurrents and the transformative power of modern technology.

Psychological, social psychological and psychiatric explanations of radicalization

Radicalization is often seen as a psychological, social psychological and psychiatric phenomenon with the first explanatory attemps seeing the terrorist as an "isolated individual with deviant character traits" (Bryanjar & Skjoldberg, 2004). Hence the oldest theories attempting to explain the behavious of terrorists from the '70s and '80s focused on personality traits and problems, while advancing a dominant view that terrorists suffer from a mental disorder, ignoring the extremely complex neurological, psychological and sociological processes by which actors engage in terrorism (Post, 1984; Laqueur, 1987). Since these first attempts, the debate on the topic has significantly advanced including additional psychological and social psychology factors that lead to radicalization.

From a psychological point of view, there are many factors that lead to radicalization processes. It has been suggested that, prior to radicalization, the individual experiences a state of uncertainty about himself and the world (Hogg 2012 and 2013; Doosje 2013; Klein 2013; Meeus 2015), as well as existential anxiety (McBride 2011). Among the psychological factors that cause radicalization there is the sense of identity described as a "search for meaning" (Kruglanski, 2014), the search for identity that contributes to the sense of belonging, value and purpose (Amarasingam & Dawson, 2017; Fein & Borum, 2017; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008), personal fulfillment (Silverman, 2017), lack of self esteem (Borum, 2017; Chassman, 2016; Christmann, 2012; Dawson, 2017; Lindekilde, 2016; Senzai, 2015), the emotion of anger (Stout, 2002), individual frustration and insult (Beutler, 2007), social-cognitive factors such as risk-taking and reduced social contact (Taylor, 2006), auto-victimization (McCauley, 2011), displacement of aggression (Moghaddam, 2005).

Alternatively, other factors may be underlying the radicalization process. Thus, for some authors, the feeling of personal uncertainty underlies the process (Ludot, 2016). Radicalization was also explained by the theories of narcissism and grandeur applied to groups, because the figure of the leader becomes for members of the group their egotistical ideal (Veldhuis, 2009). According to this interpretation, due to their grandiose self-perception, narcissists look for external enemies and blame them for their own mistakes. Therefore, they are attracted to radical organizations that stimulate hatred and enmity toward others. However, this hypothesis has not been supported by the scientific literature (Veldhuis and Staun, 2009).

The cause identified by these theories correlates with group dynamics in the sense that the group is the perfect framework that can ensure the psychological need for a purpose (elimination of enemies accused of their own mistakes).

Perceived injustice – as a severity of pain-related loss, blame, and a sense of unfairness – is often mentioned as a determinant factor of radicalization (Doosje, Loseman, & Van den Bos, 2013; Moyano, 2014; Bazex, 2017). In most cases, individuals try to make sense of their existential failure, often caused by personal experience.

Cognitive dissonance can also play a role in the radicalization process. It refers to a mental discomfort felt when one's behavior is inconsistent with his/her personal attitudes or beliefs (Festinger, 1957). In addition, cognitive dissonance also explains the fact that the more one sacrifices himself/herself for a belief, the more he/ she will be connected to that belief. Sacrifice is common among people who join a radical group, either by abandoning past behaviors or by separating from their families (even ideologically).

Some authors also mention feelings of humiliation that contribute to the radicalization process (Stern, 2003; Juergensmeyer, 2003; Richardson, 2006; Victoroff, 2010). For example, Khosrokhavar (2005) argues for "proxy humiliation", explaining that "terrorists feel humiliated by the fact that their Muslim counterparts are oppressed and thus retaliate as a form of objection." (Khosrokhavar, 2005)

Another invoked psychological factor that leads to radicalization is **frustration**. Dollard argues that the frustration-aggression hypothesis

may prove very useful in explaining political violence and terrorism (Cormick, 2003). His hypothesis states that when a person's ideal is incongruous with his real achievements, then he/she becomes frustrated and violent.

Other authors have presented various factors that predispose to radicalization, such as depressive tendencies (Merari et.al., 2009; Merari, 2010; Victoroff, 2005) or identity and belonging (Echelmeyer, Slotboom & Weerman, 2023). The latter emphasizes that being a member of a radical group and embracing a cause gives a comforting, responsive feeling to the "search for meaning" (McGilloway, 2015; Mccauley C, 2008; Kruglanski, 2009). For young people that are looking for an identity, ideologies help to form identity. Joining a terrorist group can act as a "strong identity stabilizer that gives young people a sense of belonging and purpose (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008). In cases of psychological vulnerabilities, such as the depressive dimension with frequent feelings of despair, radicalization is seen as a solution to combat depression (Rolling, 2017).

Other studies show that suicidal intent, which could precede the radicalization process, is developed as a result of the promise of a true life in the future (Bouzar and Martin, 2016). Addictive behavior is also mentioned in the literature, as radical group addiction can act as a substitute for previous addictions, such as alcohol or banned substances (Ludot et.al., 2016).

Several authors mention the psychopathological mechanisms that strengthen the radical commitment. For example, in the case of paranoia, the psychopathological mechanism acts as a defense mechanism (Rolling, 2017; Bazex, 2017; Bouzar, 2016; Schuurman, 2016). Also, obsessive-compulsive habits are common among radicalized individuals and have a purifying function (Adam-Troian & Belanger, 2024).

Dalgaard-Nielsen (2008) examined three frameworks specific to individual psychology that could help determine the causes that lead to radicalization: psychodynamic approaches, identity theory and cognitive approaches.

The psychodynamic approaches are based on the Freudian tradition of psychoanalysis, the link between violence and past traumatic events (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008). The psychodynamic approches include

narcissism theory, paranoia theory and absolutist/apocalyptic theory. These approaches suggest that early childhood experiences profoundly shape mental processes, much of which remain unconscious.

A key concept within this framework is the **narcissistic rage hypothesis**, which posits that children subjected to parental neglect fail to develop healthy self-images, mature identities, or moral frameworks[2] (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008). Moreover, paranoia theory examines how individuals manage intolerable or socially unacceptable feelings by projecting them outward. Problematic emotions are denied as part of the self and attributed to external entities, leading to an idealization of the in-group and demonization of outsiders. This paranoia, coupled with fears about the survival of the in-group, creates the psychological conditions that justify violence against perceived external threats, such as civilians (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008).

Absolutist and apocalyptic theories of terrorism highlight similar mechanisms, noting that terrorists often adopt uncompromising moral stances. This worldview, underpinned by psychological splitting and projection, appeals to young adults with fragile identities. Conspiracy theories about the annihilation of the in-group and the demonization of the out-group provide further psychological rationale for legitimizing violence as self-defense (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008).

While psychodynamic theories offer valuable insights, critics highlight their speculative nature, reliance on a priori assumptions, and lack of empirical testing. Studies in this area have been hindered by methodological issues, such as small sample sizes, limited cooperation from terrorists, and the absence of control groups, questioning the broader applicability of these theories to radicalization.

The identity theory formulated by Erik Erikson, derived from psychodynamic psychology, emphasizes the stages of identity development of young adults and the role of ideologies in shaping individual identity. Erikson states that in the process of development, young people reach a point where the adoption of ideologies contributes significantly to the

[2] To cope, such individuals may develop grandiose fantasies of self-exaltation or immerse themselves in a group, adopting its identity as a substitute for their damaged sense of self. In either case, the unresolved trauma fosters a strong desire to annihilate the source of the original harm, with terrorist violence emerging as a projection of this suppressed rage onto external targets.

stabilization of their identity. For example, a young person with low self-esteem caused by overly authoritarian parents may find joining a terrorist group an "identity stabilizer," providing a sense of belonging, worth, and purpose. According to Identity Theory, joining a terrorist group can be interpreted as a form of rebellion against the traditional cultures of the parental generation, but also against the Western majority culture, providing a platform for rebellion, self-affirmation and defining identity properties. This theory emphasizes the importance of identity formation processes in understanding the dynamics of radicalization (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008).

Finally, according to cognitive theory, there is a potential link between cognitive style and the individual's willingness to engage in terrorist acts (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008). Horgan distinguishes in his work, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, three related psychological aspects: the psychology of the becoming process, the psychology of the terrorist and the psychology of disengagement from terrorism (Horgan, 2005). The author provides several arguments. In his view, radicalization is a progressive process. The author emphasizes dissatisfaction or disillusionment with one's own person/life, that makes the individual open to outside influences. Circumstances in which this is achieved include loss of loved ones, workplace, etc. This is called "*thawing*" in psychology, "*biographical availability*" in sociology, and "*cognitive openness*" in the theory of social movements. The idea of a cognitive openness that makes the individual vulnerable to radical influences is also mentioned in a multidisciplinary research (Campelo, Oppetit, Neau, Cohen, & Bronsar, 2018) that aimed to detect the reasons behind European adolescents and young adults having been attracted to radicalism since 2010. These results suggest that adolescent psychopathology plays a role in the radicalization process. The same study examines the interaction between adolescent mechanisms and radical influences: personal uncertainty combined with triggering events provides cognitive openings to extremist groups and ideologies that provide a purpose, a sense of belonging, and moral certainty. A three-level explanatory model (individual, micro-environment, macro-environment) is thus created including risk factors extending from adolescence to a psychiatric condition, psychological vulnerability, abandonment problems, perceived injustice, and personal uncertainty.

Contemporary scholarship has extended foundational psychological, social psychological, and psychiatric theories to better capture the complex, multifactorial nature of radicalization, which often intersects individual vulnerabilities with broader social and ideological contexts. Modern psychological approaches increasingly focus on cognitive and emotional factors that predispose individuals to radicalization, with particular attention to identity crises, perceived injustice, and socio-political grievances.

Recent studies emphasize the role of identity fusion–a psychological state in which individuals' personal and group identities become deeply intertwined, often making group interests inseparable from personal identity (Swann, Jetten, Gomez, & Whitehouse, 2012; Swann Jr. & Buhrmester, 2015). This fusion creates a potent foundation for individuals to act on behalf of their group, sometimes with extreme commitment to ideological goals. Identity fusion is often coupled with existential and psychological needs, such as the search for meaning, which can lead individuals to embrace radical ideologies that promise a purposeful path (Webber & Kruglanski, 2018; Gomez et al., 2021). Additionally, cognitive closure, or the desire for definitive answers to ambiguous or complex questions, has been linked to susceptibility to extremist ideologies, especially when individuals experience identity threats or uncertainty (Obaidi et al., 2023). Similar, some authors linked cognitive inflexibility with extremist attitudes (Zmigrod, Rentfrow, & Robbins, 2019).

Alternatively, social psychological research highlights the importance of group dynamics in shaping the radicalization process. Collective narcissism–the belief in the exaggerated greatness of one's in-group coupled with resentment toward perceived out-group threats – has been shown to intensify hostility towards perceived external threats, fueling violent radicalization (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Iskra-Golec, 2013). This phenomenon is magnified within echo chambers created by social networks, both offline and online, which reinforce in-group biases and ideological convictions. Social contagion and online radicalization pathways are increasingly recognized as contributors to extremist commitments, as individuals reinforce and validate each other's grievances and narratives within virtual communities (Mughal et al., 2024; Ware, 2023).

A recent meta-analysis concerning the association between the variables of the 3N (need, narrative and network) model[3] and violent extremism, indicated that the association is strong for quest of significance and low for need for significance (Da Silva, et al., 2024). The findings suggest that while most people may have a general need for significance, only those with an intense, unfulfilled drive to actively pursue it (often due to personal or social triggers) are more vulnerable to radicalization and violent extremism. This highlights that violent extremists are not just seeking meaning in an abstract sense; they are driven by a pressing, motivational force that pushes them to find meaning specifically through extreme avenues.

Advances in neuropsychology and social cognitive neuroscience have also contributed to the study of radicalization, examining how empathy deficits, moral disengagement, and biased social cognition contribute to extremist attitudes. Moral disengagement theories suggest that individuals may bypass normal ethical constraints by rationalizing violent actions, viewing them as justified or even morally superior due to perceived existential or ideological threats (Concha-Salgado, Ramirez, Perez, Perez-Luco, & Garcia-Cueto, 2022). Such mechanisms are reinforced within radical groups where in-group loyalty and ideological alignment reduce empathy for out-groups, contributing to the dehumanization of perceived enemies.

In sum, while earlier psychological and psychiatric theories focused on isolated individual traits, recent theories emphasize complex interactions between identity, cognition, social influences, and digital networks. These approaches underscore the need for an interdisciplinary framework to understand how psychological vulnerabilities and group dynamics coalesce to foster radicalization. Future research is called upon to further explore how digital radicalization pathways, particularly

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[3] The 3N model, developed by social psychologist Arie Kruglanski, is a framework used to understand the psychological factors that drive individuals towards violent extremism. This model identifies three core components, or "N"'s, that contribute to radicalization: Need – Refers to a person's search for personal significance or purpose. Narrative – The ideological story or belief system that justifies violent actions as a means to achieve significance. Network – The social connections that support and reinforce the narrative and behaviour.

in social media contexts, and socio-cognitive factors intersect with individual vulnerabilities, shaping a nuanced and evolving understanding of radicalization.

Mental Health Disorders that Increase Susceptibility to Radicalization

In the context of addressing psychological factors, the literature has sought to analyze the link between psychological disorders[4] and radicalization. Recent research on the role of mental health in radicalization has shifted toward a nuanced understanding of mental health disorders as non-causal but influential factors in certain radicalization pathways.

The analysis of Misiak et al. (2019) on representative studies that examined radicalization in the context of the presence of mental health disorders revealed an association between depression and the risk of radicalization, without showing whether the problem is the level of resilience or personal vulnerability (Misiak et al., 2019). Other studies suggest that psychological distress, including depression and anxiety, can predispose individuals to extremist ideologies, particularly when compounded by social isolation and lack of social support (Corner & Gill, 2021). However, scholars caution against stigmatizing mental illness as a primary driver of radicalization, emphasizing that while psychological vulnerabilities may create susceptibility, they are rarely sufficient alone to cause violent radicalization (Bhui, Everitt, & Jones, 2014). Instead, mental health concerns can interact with socio-political grievances and identity struggles, amplifying the individual's engagement with extremist ideologies, particularly in "lone actor" contexts (Corner & Gill, 2015).

According to Campelo, psychiatric disorders are rare among radicalized youth. Bazex and Benezech found that most individuals analyzed by them have different dysfunctional personality traits without having a formal psychiatric diagnosis. Only 10% of the individuals

[4] The Statistical Manual of Diagnosis of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) defines mental disorders as a syndrome characterized by a clinically significant disturbance in the cognition, regulation of emotions, or behaviour of an individual that reflects a dysfunction in psychological, biological, or developmental processes, underlying mental functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

studied by Bazex and Benezech were diagnosed with a psychiatric condition. The others simply displayed antisocial, obsessive, and histrionic traits (Campelo, Oppetit, Neau, Cohen, & Bronsar, 2018). However, there is evidence that mental disorders may be more prevalent, especially with regard to lone actor terrorism.

The Radicalization Awareness Network Handbook on Extremism, Radicalization and Mental Health (2019) concludes that "there is no empirical evidence to suggest that terrorism is committed primarily by the mentally ill. Wherever there is a certain relevance, it cannot be causal and, if it is partially causal, it is possible to interact with a number of political, social, environmental, situational and biological factors at any time" (RAN, 2019). Mental disorders, as a factor of radicalization, are correlated with other factors, such as: social ties, political beliefs, cultural environment (Bhui, 2018).

In conclusion, although there are indications of a possible connection between such disorders and terrorism such as lone actors, there are still not enough studies that have investigated the relationship between mental disorders and radicalization to be able to state with certainty that such a link exists. From the existing studies (O'Driscoll, 2018; Corner & Gill, 2015) there is rather a prevalence of psychological disorders in single actors compared to those who are part of terrorist groups or organizations.

Social theories of radicalization

Social theories provide crucial frameworks for understanding radicalization by examining how individuals are influenced by group dynamics, social structures, and cultural contexts. There are a number of sociological perspectives on the models and explanations of radicalization. In this sense, social relations are considered to be crucial for understanding radicalization (Echelmeyer, Slotboom, & Weerman, 2023; Christmann, 2012).

Radicalisation is a "group" phenomenon in which friends, relatives and top-down recruitment processes encourage new members to internalize the common menthality of a certain group (Christmann, 2012). Increasingly the phenomenom is viewed as a socially mediated process, often taking shape within groups that reinforce shared grievances, norms, and ideologies. The phenomenon was intensively

studied from a social movement (Kaya & Bee, 2023; Cross & Snow, 2011; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008; Beck, 2008) and also from a social network perspective (Chua, 2024; Kruglanski, Belanger, & Gunaratna, 2019; Perliger & Pedahzur, 2011). These studies highlight the role of social networks and social connections on radicalization processes, the individuals' interraction with the radical group and individuals' alignment with the framework of the terrorist organization, its values and convictions.

One of the foundational social theories applied to radicalization is **social movement theory**, which examines how radical ideas are spread, sustained, and mobilized within collective movements. Della Porta was the first to apply the theory of social movement (often used in social sciences) in the study of radicalization through an analysis of Italian and German militants (1995).

Recent scholarship has built upon Wiktorowicz's (2004) model, which explains radicalization through mechanisms such as cognitive openings, religious pursuits, and the construction of sacred authority (Wiktorowicz, 2004). In this framework, individuals are drawn to radical groups that provide not only ideological clarity but also a sense of purpose, belonging, and legitimacy. Building on this, researchers have emphasized the role of social media in facilitating the "leaderless jihad" model proposed by Sageman (2008), where dispersed networks enable individuals to self-radicalize and act autonomously without direct organizational control. Studies indicate that "online networks foster a *virtual caliphate* by providing decentralized support, thereby reducing dependence on traditional, hierarchical structures of terrorist organizations." (Conway, Scrivens, & Macnair, 2019)

In *Clandestine Political Violence*, della Porta (2013) sought common mechanisms for radicalizing violence[5]. She found that small cells break away from sympathizers and can become more vehement in justifying and perpetuating violence, and are more focused on preserving the unity of the group rather than sustaining the initial cause (della Porta, 2013). The motivation of the members was more related to the group than to the original cause itself.

[5] Within four types of underground groups: Italians and left-wing Germans, right-wing Italians, basques ethnonationalists and al-Qaeda jihadists.

In the context of social theories, it is necessary to analyze the dynamics of groups because it is relevant to the interaction of the individual with the group and the individual's alignment with the framework of the terrorist group. Often, terrorist groups include people with different backgrounds, who might not normally form a group due to the existing differences between them. Given the diversity observed among radicalized people and the fact that these individuals are often easy to overlook, some researchers have tried to explain radicalization through group dynamics (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Specifically, they sought to clarify why individuals join certain types of groups.

There are two main reasons why group dynamics have a significant influence on radicalization. The first is that groups satisfy (and are able to exploit) the psychological need, especially of young recruits, of finding a meaning and a purpose. Membership of a certain group and participation in its activities satisfy the "psychological search for meaning".

The second reason is that groups amplify "departure costs" once an individual has joined. Even if a person loses faith in the ideology, strategy or tactics of the group, he cannot get out easily. There will be feelings of loyalty, guilt and anxiety about returning to his previous "normal" life.

Because the dynamics of the group are not related to a particular ideology or framework, they could help clarify the important dimensions of the radicalization process applicable to different types of extremists. Such explanations also involve different strategies of case monitoring and management. Certain group behaviors identified by social psychology are relevant in this regard (Doosje, Feddes, & Mann, 2024).

This perspective suggests that social ties and intergroup relationships are critical in fostering a collective identity, a sense of solidarity, and shared goals among radicals. Recent studies, such as those by Gill et al. (2017), demonstrate that digital platforms intensify these social ties, amplifying the reach and emotional impact of radical ideologies. Radicalization is often seen as a "socially contagious" process, where individuals are drawn into extremism through direct contact with radicalized peers and through online communities that act as echo chambers, reinforcing shared grievances and ideological convictions (Binder & Kenyon, 2022). This phenomenon is especially

significant for "lone-actor" terrorists, who are increasingly shown to operate within virtual networks that offer ideological support and technical guidance without the need for physical proximity to other extremists (Elis, et al., 2016).

Polarization theory has also become essential in examining how radicalization unfolds in socially divided contexts. Social polarization refers to the process by which groups' attitudes and beliefs become increasingly extreme as a reaction to perceived threats or injustices. In this process, people adopt rigid in-group and out-group distinctions, perceiving external groups as existential threats.

Social polarization starts from the idea that some individual opinions have the tendency to become extreme in a group context, transforming the attitude of the group into a more extreme one compared to that of individual members. In this context, Berger defines radicalization as the process of adopting increasingly negative ideas about an external group and increasing harsh action against it, which are justified (Berger, 2017).

Brandsma (2020) highlights that radicalization can often stem from the polarization of beliefs within closed social networks, where interactions with like-minded individuals fuel antagonism toward out-groups (Bradsma, 2020). Polarization is a construction of thinking based on the "us" and "them" identity hypotheses. In a process of polarization, the dominant and active narrative is related to perceived and often exaggerated simplistic differences about the others. The aspects shared by the two identities are neglected. Polarization is like the negative attitude and thinking about other groups, which can lead to increased hostility and segregation. Ultimately, this could lead to situations where intolerance turns into hate speech and even crime. In such situations, some parts of the group or individuals may radicalize, leading to violent extremism and terrorism. Polarization does not necessarily lead to radicalization, but it is one of the factors that make individuals vulnerable to extremist propaganda and recruitment. Preventing and reducing polarization can implicitly prevent radicalization (Bradsma, 2020). These divisions are exacerbated by the algorithmic nature of social media platforms, which can amplify polarized content and create feedback loops that reinforce radical ideologies (Watkin, Gerrand, & Conmay, 2022).

Recent literature explored the ways in which on-line social networks and the Internet can lead to radicalization. Most recent authors suggest that the Internet acts as an enabling environment for spreding extremist ideas (Marwick, Clancy, & Furl, 2022) or as a decision-shaping which can facilitate decision-making in association with offline factors (Ghayda, et al., 2018).

Still, few studies comprehensively examine how online environments interact with mental health to influence radicalization. Understanding these interactions is essential, especially given the rising influence of online recruitment strategies.

Reconsidering psychological, social psychological, psychiatrical and social theories of radicalization

The classical literature on radicalization was initially oriented towards explaining the social, psychological and psychiatric causes of radicalization. Recent advancements in research on mental health and radicalization have illuminated many aspects of this relationship; however, significant gaps remain. We have identified the research gaps mentioned in the present section following the analisys of the research literature. Addressing these gaps is essential to deepening understanding and improving interventions. Furthermore, addressing the gaps in research surrounding radicalization and mental health significantly influence the effectiveness of practical interventions and prevention strategies. Understanding the impact of these gaps is essential for policymakers, mental health professionals, and law enforcement agencies aiming to address radicalization more effectively.

There is a need for longitudinal studies. Predominantly cross-sectional, existing research captures data at single time points, limiting insight into causation. Longitudinal studies are necessary to distinguish causative from associative factors, elucidating how mental health conditions develop and intersect with radicalization pathways over time. The predominance of cross-sectional studies limits the understanding of the causal pathways leading to radicalization. Without longitudinal data, interventions may be designed based on associations rather than causative factors, resulting in ineffective or misdirected efforts. For instance, programs that focus solely on immediate mental health issues may neglect the evolving nature of these conditions over time and their

intersection with radicalization. This limitation underscores the need for intervention strategies that are adaptable and responsive to the longitudinal development of individual mental health profiles and radicalization pathways.

Current studies often isolate mental health variables without sufficiently contextualizing them within broader sociopolitical frameworks. Further research should explore how individual vulnerabilities, such as trauma or isolation, interact with political grievances or social dynamics to facilitate radicalization. While links between depression, anxiety, and certain personality disorders and susceptibility to radicalization have been observed, the roles of conditions like PTSD, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia are less understood. Studies should clarify how these specific disorders affect different radicalization aspects, particularly in distinguishing lone actors from group-based extremists.

Current isolation of mental health variables from broader sociopolitical contexts hinders the development of interventions that address the root causes of radicalization. For example, individuals with mental health issues may be more susceptible to radicalization when they perceive political injustices or social grievances. An in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of radicalization should explore whether it should be approached predominantly from a legal-normative, psycho-pathological perspective or through the prism of its finality. From a legal-normative point of view, radicalization can be understood as a significant deviation from accepted social norms, being treated as a threat to public order and managed through strict legal regulations and institutional measures. Instead, the psycho-pathological perspective approaches radicalization through the lens of individual predispositions, psychological dysfunctions or personal vulnerabilities that can facilitate the adoption of extreme beliefs or the justification of violence. On the other hand, an ends-focused approach analyzes radicalization in relation to the ends and means adopted, treating violence either as an inevitable means or as a consequence of well-defined ideological, political or social objectives. These perspectives provide a complementary interpretive framework for understanding the complexity of radicalization and the factors that contribute to its emergence. By integrating these approaches, more effective prevention and combat measures can be identified, be they

legal, psychological or socio-political, depending on the nature and context of the analyzed phenomenon. Programs that fail to integrate these broader contexts may inadvertently ignore significant factors contributing to an individual's radicalization journey, leading to interventions that lack relevance or effectiveness. Practical efforts must prioritize a holistic understanding of the individual's environment, incorporating sociopolitical grievances alongside mental health support.

Furthermore, there is a need for a distinction between ideological and psychological drivers of radicalization. The interaction between mental health disorders and ideological or environmental influences remains a debated area. Research must aim to clarify the relative impact of psychological vulnerabilities versus ideological beliefs in driving radicalization, especially among individuals with co-occurring influences.

The failure to distinguish between ideological and psychological drivers may result in interventions that do not adequately address the motivations of radicalized individuals. For instance, if practitioners presume that all radicalized individuals are driven primarily by psychological vulnerabilities, they may overlook ideological components that also play a critical role. This oversight could lead to the development of intervention strategies that address only one aspect of the radicalization process, limiting their effectiveness. A more nuanced approach that simultaneously addresses psychological vulnerabilities and ideological beliefs is necessary for creating comprehensive intervention frameworks.

Regarding psychological theories on radicalization, more empirical research is needed on which mental health traits or interventions act as protective factors against radicalization. Identifying resilience factors, such as adaptive coping skills, social support, and therapeutic interventions, could inform preventive frameworks to mitigate susceptibility to extremist ideologies. The absence of research identifying specific protective factors against radicalization hampers the ability to develop resilience-based interventions. If practitioners are unaware of which mental health traits or social supports effectively shield individuals from radicalization, they may struggle to create prevention programs that bolster resilience. This lack of knowledge may result in missed opportunities to promote adaptive coping strategies, social support networks, and community resources that could mitigate the risk of radicalization.

Furthermore, only few studies examine how mental health affects radicalization differently across genders, though differing socialization patterns and gender-specific mental health concerns may lead to varied pathways. The limited understanding of how mental health affects radicalization across genders results in interventions that may not effectively address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of different demographic groups. For example, male and female individuals may experience radicalization differently due to variations in socialization and mental health concerns. A lack of gender-sensitive approaches may lead to the development of one-size-fits-all strategies that fail to engage effectively with at-risk individuals. Understanding these dynamics could enable more tailored prevention and intervention strategies, which can enhance their relevance and effectiveness.

Additionaly the theories on social networks require further updates. Social network theories aimed to explain the role of the social network in the process of radicalization, or more precisely to explain radicalization from the perspective of the social network to which individuals adhere. Although these theories are useful and the literature on this topic is consistent, they could benefit from current developments, such as the perspective of social networks[6] that are created online. Online platforms are known to heighten mental health issues by creating echo chambers, fostering isolation, and amplifying grievances, yet few studies have assessed how these environments interact with mental health to drive radicalization. Further research is essential to address the impact of digital recruitment strategies.

As social networks evolve, particularly in digital contexts, reliance on outdated theories can lead to ineffective strategies for intervention and prevention. Online platforms have fundamentally altered how individuals connect and radicalize, yet current theories may not adequately account for these changes. Failing to integrate the dynamics of online radicalization can lead to interventions that overlook crucial avenues for engagement, such as monitoring online behaviors, understanding digital recruitment tactics, and addressing the role of echo chambers in amplifying grievances.

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[6] For example, on Telegram, Vkontakte or chatroom games that are increasingly used by radicalized people to form online radical clusters.

Radicalization theories related to group dynamics, especially those related to group thinking, in-group/out-group biases, diminished sense of responsibility, perception of rewards or benefits, group norms and rules explain the actions of people who join a terrorist group, but not those of solitary actors, who act individually. It does not mean that these theories are not valid from the perspective of lone actors. On the contrary, these actors – by declaring their affiliation with a group, although they are not actually part of that group – or by adhering to an ideology that imposes rules and regulations – come to have that sense of belonging. Evidence suggests that lone actors often exhibit higher rates of mental health disorders compared to group-affiliated extremists, yet research has not fully addressed why this disparity exists or how specific mental health profiles may influence the choice to act independently rather than within a group. This research gap may result in inadequate intervention strategies that fail to address their unique pathways to radicalization. Understanding the specific mental health factors that drive lone actors can inform more effective and targeted interventions, potentially reducing the risk of violence from individuals acting independently.

There is a need for a comprehensive study on the family and the role of families in the radicalization process, especially from the perspective of the possibility that the family is either a risk factor or a protective one in relation to radicalization. The study by Sikkens, van San, Sieckelinck and de Winter (2018) showed that most parents make significant efforts to cope with the signs of radicalization of their children and do not know how to react. This study examines how parents react to their children's interest in extremist ideologies and advocates for the analysis of the influence of parental support and control in deradicalization (Sikkens, van San, Sieckelinck, & de Winter, 2018). Family is a complex category and nuanced interprettations must be made distinguishing between parents and more distant relatives (aunts, cousins, etc.). Family tensions, intra-family violence, family functionality and the impact of absent or dysfunctional parents are also factors that require complex analysis. Moreover, it is necessary to analyze the sociocultural context of families and how they function in various cultural contexts. While families and communities can play protective roles, limited research exists on their role in supporting mental health interventions that reduce radicalization

risks. Research should explore how family or community-centered mental health programs could buffer against extremist recruitment, particularly among vulnerable youth.

These research gaps potentially leading to a new reseach agenda on the topic stems from various historical, methodological, and contextual factors. Historically, research on radicalization has predominantly centered on individual psychological and social factors, that has often marginalized the role of families and social networks, leading to a lack of comprehensive studies that consider how familial dynamics influence radicalization. Family systems are inherently complex, with varying influences from immediate family members and extended relatives. Factors such as familial relationships, intra-family communication, cultural background, and socio-economic status can all play significant roles in shaping an individual's experiences and vulnerabilities. This complexity makes it challenging for researchers to create standardized frameworks for studying family influences, resulting in a lack of clear findings.

Furthermore, families operate within diverse sociocultural contexts, and the dynamics of family life can differ significantly across cultures. Consequently, researchers may hesitate to engage deeply with family dynamics due to concerns about cultural specificity and the applicability of findings across different contexts. Research methodologies traditionally used in radicalization studies may not adequately capture the nuances of family dynamics. Quantitative methods that rely on surveys and statistical analysis may struggle to address complex interpersonal relationships and the qualitative aspects of familial influence. Consequently, qualitative research – such as interviews and case studies – may be less prevalent, leading to a gap in understanding how family dynamics affect radicalization.

Researching families, particularly in the context of radicalization, may involve sensitive issues such as parental control, familial dysfunction, or experiences of trauma. This sensitivity can create barriers for researchers in accessing families or eliciting candid responses, limiting the data available for analysis. Additionally, the stigma surrounding radicalization may lead families to be reluctant to participate in research studies.

The intersection of family dynamics with radicalization is inherently interdisciplinary, requiring insights from psychology, sociology, criminology and family studies. However, these disciplines often operate in silos,

leading to a lack of comprehensive research that encompasses the various dimensions of family influence in the context of radicalization.

The lack of comprehensive research on the role of families in the radicalization process limits the ability of practitioners to engage effectively with families as potential protective factors. Families can significantly influence an individual's susceptibility to radicalization, yet without a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, interventions may overlook critical support systems. Developing family-centered approaches that recognize the complex relationships within families can enhance intervention strategies, enabling practitioners to leverage familial support in combating radicalization.

All of the before mentioned research gaps on the interplay between mental health and radicalization have profound implications for practical interventions and preventive strategies. Addressing these research gaps will provide a nuanced understanding of the mental health and radicalization nexus, fostering more precise, evidence-based preventive and intervention measures. This has the potential to enhance the ability to identify at-risk individuals, provide appropriate support, and ultimately reduce the incidence of radicalization and extremist violence.

Conclusions

This article has revisited and synthesized foundational and contemporary theories on radicalization, drawing from social, psychological, and psychiatric perspectives to provide a more nuanced understanding of this complex phenomenon. It is clear that radicalization is not driven by a single factor but rather by an interplay of personal vulnerabilities, group dynamics and societal influences, which are further intensified by modern digital networks. Traditional theories have expanded to address the influence of identity crises, collective grievances, and cognitive vulnerabilities, while recent scholarship highlights the impact of online communities and polarized environments on fostering extremist ideologies. Despite significant progress in understanding these pathways, gaps remain, particularly in the roles of familial factors, mental health, and digital platforms. Continued

interdisciplinary research is essential to refine these theoretical models, with attention to emerging influences in a rapidly evolving social and digital landscape. Such efforts will be critical to developing targeted prevention and intervention strategies that address the root causes and diverse pathways leading to radicalization.

Psychological and psychiatric theories of radicalization remain relevant for traditional radicalization because they allow detailed analysis of the individual and psychological factors that predispose an individual to extremist ideologies. Contextualizing mental health in relation to current socio-political variables is essential, requiring clear distinctions between ideological and psychological factors of radicalization. Research should examine the role of mental health as a protective factor and explore gender differences, given that socialization processes and mental health concerns may differentially influence radicalization in men and women. In addition, the need for a comprehensive analysis of the role of the family emphasizes the importance of considering the family as either a possible risk factor or a protective one. Thus, the intersection between family dynamics and radicalization is interdisciplinary and requires insights from psychology, sociology, criminology and family studies.

Psychological, socio-psychological, social as well as psychiatric theories of the radicalization process require revision in light of new technological and contextual developments. Social media platforms, chat rooms, and gamification mechanisms have radically altered the way radicalization occurs, allowing for constant, unfiltered exposure to extremist ideologies and connecting individuals susceptible to negative influences. Social networks facilitate the formation of closed groups, favouring polarization and reinforcing beliefs through algorithms that prioritize extreme or controversial content. Also, through gamification, one can see a manipulation of behaviour and a motivation of individuals to actively participate in the distribution of radical messages, and artificial intelligence adds an additional dimension, personalizing user experiences and intensifying their vulnerabilities. These transformations require a more nuanced and integrated approach that considers new ways in which technology shapes human psychology and behaviour in the context of radicalization.

None of the theories discussed in this paper provides definite answers. No theory can explain all the processes behind radicalization, especially behind violent radicalization. But achieving clarity in defining our concepts and the proper use of guidance from the last ten years of social science theory and research can help reduce the reinvention of a problem and provide a platform to move forward.

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