

Indicators and manifestations of resilience of the Dutch population against extremist messages

A theoretical and methodological exploration

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Summary

Background and objectives

This research was commissioned by the Research and Documentation Centre of the Ministry of Security and Justice (Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum; WODC), on behalf of the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid; NCTV). The NCTV felt a need for more knowledge about the conceptualization and options to measure the resilience of the Dutch population against extremist messages.

Radicalization concerns an important contemporary issue in the Netherlands. Although radicalization manifests itself in different ways, in the past years there have been mainly concerns about jihadist extremism, strengthened by the advance of Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq. Young Dutch Muslims may be susceptible to jihadist propaganda and recruiters' attempts to mobilize them to join IS or another terrorist organization. Resilience against extremist messages could, however, form a counterforce against these developments. For this reason, there is a need for insight in factors that play a role in this type of resilience, not only among certain groups of youngsters in the Netherlands, but in the Dutch population as a whole.

Although resilience to adversity, trauma and disaster has been studied rather extensively, much less is known about resilience in the context of radicalization and extremism. It appears that this type of resilience is not clearly defined and operationalized and there exists no overview of characteristics on the basis of which the degree of resilience of citizens against extremist influences can be determined. In addition, it is unclear how characteristics of resilience can be measured reliably and efficiently.

The current research is focused on acquiring insight in the characteristics of resilience of the Dutch population against extremist ideas and developing possible methods to measure these characteristics periodically.

Research questions

The two general research questions are: 1.) What is resilience against extremist messages? and 2.) Is this type of resilience measurable and if so, how? Regarding the theoretical exploration of this phenomenon, we focus mainly on resilience against extremist ideas in general, however, because of recent developments, we focus in parts of the empirical studies on groups that might be susceptible to Islamic extremism.

On the basis of the general research questions, the following sub-questions are formulated:

- a) *How can resilience against extremist messages be defined and operationalized?*
- b) *How does the resilience of the Dutch population against extremist messages manifests itself?*
- c) *How is resilience against extremist messages being measured and reported abroad?*
- d) *Which characteristics (i.e., indicators and manifestations) of resilience against extremist messages are observable and measurable for the NCTV?*
- e) *How can we periodically measure the indicators and manifestations of resilience against extremist messages in a sound manner?*
- f) *To what extent can we use existing data (for example, CBS or CPB data) or social media in a periodical measurement of resilience against extremist messages?*
- g) *How can we summarize the separate indicators and manifestations in a conveniently arranged image, description or number that can be used to capture the resilience of (parts of) the Dutch population?*
- h) *What are the costs (financial, time-investment) that are tied to these methods?*
- i) *What are advantages and disadvantages of these methods?*

Research methods

Different quantitative as well as qualitative methods were used to answer these questions. First, the *definition and conceptualization* of resilience against extremist messages were investigated by means of an extensive literature study and interviews with Dutch and international experts, and an expert-meeting with Dutch experts in the field.

Subsequently, we focused on the aim with regard to the *measurability* of resilience. To this end, we first analyzed an important general indicator of resilience, namely institutional trust, as well some potential predictors of this trust, namely social trust, feelings of discrimination, political interest, social participation, and civic involvement. For this we have used existing data, collected by means of the European Social Survey (ESS), for which we analyzed a representative sample from the Dutch population over the years 2002 to 2012 ($N = 11.586$).

Furthermore, we have set up a new study with the aim of measuring an important manifestation of resilience, namely offering a dissenting opinion (by means of self-report). In addition we have measured, besides institutional trust, a number of other indicators of resilience, namely a need for cognitive closure, a quest for significance and multiple group

membership¹. These data were collected within a representative sample from the Dutch population ($N = 1023$). By means of additional data-collection, we have also compared these variables for Muslim youngsters ($N = 162$) and non-Muslim youngsters ($N = 307$) in the Netherlands.

Finally, we studied *actual* behavior, namely posts on a social medium, as a more specific manifestation of resilience. This was done by means of a qualitative and different quantitative content-analyses of discussions, in this case 149.394 posts, on an important source of information for Moroccan Dutch youngsters, the online discussion forum on the website Marokko.nl. During the period of 15 September 2013 until 15 September 2014 these posts were analyzed for indications of resilience.

The aim of these different studies was to explore methods with which the resilience against extremist messages in the Dutch society could be periodically determined in a relatively easy and reliable way.

Results

On the basis of the literature study and the interviews with experts we define resilience against extremist messages as ‘the extent to which citizens resist and/or oppose extremist influences on the basis of cognitive, affective and behavioral indicators.’ Thus, in relation to resilience in the context of radicalization, we particularly refer to the ability to offer resistance against persuasive messages by radical or extremist individuals or groups, on cognitive, affective and behavioral levels (**Sub-question a**). Answering **Sub-question b**, we argue that resilience displays itself largely by resistance or the offering of a dissenting opinion against extremist expressions. In addition, we consider a more nonviolent attitude as a form of resilience against extremist messages.

Three important aspects play a role when investigating and measuring resilience against extremist messages, namely:

1. *Generic versus specific*: Is resilience studied in the general population (‘the Dutch population’) or in a specific group (for example the resilience of Muslim youngsters in the ‘Schilderswijk’ in The Hague)?

¹ A need for cognitive closure can be defined as “a desire for definite knowledge on some issue” (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996, p. 263). In other words, people with a high need for closure prefer clear, ‘black and white’ conclusions without ambiguity and they avoid ambivalence. A quest for significance is defined by Kruglanski and colleagues (2014, p. 73) as a “fundamental desire to matter, to be someone, to have respect”. Multiple group-membership means that a person is a member of, or belongs to several different groups.

2. *Context*: Contextual factors (for example time, place, social group which one belongs to) play a role when assessing people's resilience.
3. *Level*: resilience can be conceptualized and determined at a macro- (community), meso- (group) or micro- (individual) level.

These aspects should be taken into account when investigating and measuring resilience, because they have important consequences for the approach of the phenomenon and factors that are related to resilience. In the current research, we use a generic approach of resilience in the theoretic (first) part of the report, however, because of current events in society we gradually focus more on the specific group of Muslim youngsters in the Netherlands. We include a number of contextual factors in our studies (for example time and place), but we acknowledge that further research should pay attention to other contextual factors as well to get a more complete picture of resilience against extremist messages. Finally, from our social-psychological perspective, we mainly investigate the individual- (micro) and group- (meso) level of resilience. However, here as well, we acknowledge that attention should be paid to the other (macro) level and possible interactions between levels in future research.

In answering **Sub-question c** we conclude that, although the importance of resilience against extremist messages is also acknowledged abroad, and (strengthening) this resilience is often part of programs to prevent or combat radicalization, still little empirical research has been conducted on this type of resilience. Resilience against extremist messages is usually not well-defined and it is not measured or reported directly, even though international scholars acknowledge the need for more research on this type of resilience.

After answering these more theoretical questions, we conducted three empirical studies. The first was focused on institutional trust in the Netherlands on the basis of data of the European Social Survey (**Sub-questions d and f**). The results show that this indicator and some of its predictors in the Dutch population are observable and measurable. The data of the European Social Survey are a suitable source of information from a representative sample to analyze this. In this study, we observe that institutional trust remains stable over the years (with a little relapse in 2004), and that this trust is positively predicted in particular by general social trust and political interest. In other words: the more social trust and political interest people indicate to have, the more they also report to have institutional trust. Furthermore, institutional trust is predicted (to a lesser degree) negatively by experienced discrimination: The more discrimination people indicate to have, the lower the institutional trust they report.

The second empirical study, for which new data were collected from a representative sample in the Netherlands and Dutch Muslim and non-Muslim youngsters, (**Sub-question d**), shows that, besides institutional trust, three other indicators of resilience, a need for cognitive closure, a quest for significance and multiple group-membership are, in principle, also observable and measurable. The same holds for manifestations of resilience in terms of offering a dissenting opinion. As yet, we cannot, however, give a decisive indication of the validity of some of the measures of indicators and manifestations of resilience. Further research is needed to be able to argue with more confidence that the employed measures indeed capture the intended characteristics of resilience. Consequentially, the results of this study in terms of *content* (which we discuss below) should be regarded with great caution.

In terms of content, we replicate the most important results of the first empirical study (the ESS-data) regarding institutional trust. Furthermore, the results show that people indicate to offer a dissenting opinion more often when they have a low need for cognitive closure. These people are better able and motivated to see shades of grey in the world (as opposed to a black-and-white worldview) which may lead them to question extremist messages more often. Furthermore, we find that people who experience a quest for significance less strongly are more resilient, because they indicate to offer a dissenting opinion against extremist messages more often.

The last empirical study entailed a content-analysis of posts on the website Marokko.nl (**Sub-questions d, e, f and g**). On the basis of this analysis, we have constructed a so-called resilience index, which represents the proportion of posts that incite to extremism and messages against this (the dissenting opinions). This resilience index can be visualized in a graph over time. The analyses show that it is possible to assess variations in resilience over time measured in this way. Thus, for example, we find that the amount of dissenting opinions (and thus the resilience) increases after the dissemination of the video of the beheading of James Foley by IS in August 2014. However, the automatic content-analyses are currently not yet sufficiently reliable. Further research is needed to improve the reliability of this measure for these analyses as well.

Conclusions and recommendations

The main goal of this research was to offer insight in the questions of what exactly is resilience in the context of radicalization and extremism and whether this resilience is observable and measurable. To this end, we have conducted a first series of exploratory studies, using a diverse set of methods. However, we want to emphasize that on the basis of these first studies,

at this stage, it is not yet possible to make general statements about the degree of resilience of (groups in) contemporary Dutch society. Thus, it is not possible to *draw content-related conclusions about resilience* on the basis of the results of this research. This research *does* give a first indication of a definition, a conceptualization and an operationalization of resilience against extremist messages.

The operationalization of resilience in different indicators and manifestations offers a number of starting points for a more solid measurement of resilience in the Dutch population. From the first empirical study, we conclude that the use of existing (ESS) data can be useful in determining the general resilience in the Netherlands. These data give a broad, general impression of indicators, and their interrelationship, of which we suppose that they play a role in resilience. It is recommended to compare institutional trust and related variables in the Netherlands with these aspects in other European countries in future research.

Furthermore, we argue that the survey that we have developed and used in the second empirical study offers a useful starting point to further develop an instrument with which indicators and manifestations of resilience can be assessed. However, more research is needed to further test and validate the measures before such an instrument can be used for the actual assessment of the degree of resilience in the Dutch population.

Finally, we conclude that it appears to be possible to determine a behavioral measure for resilience, the so-called resilience index, which regards posts on social media. This resilience index gives an indication of the proportion incitement to extremism in posts on a forum versus messages against this. The fluctuations in the proportion between these two can be made visible over time. Further research is needed to make the measure sufficiently reliable for the automatic content-analyses. Ideally, this resilience index should be assessed via several different social media so to give comparatively insight in the resilience of different groups in society as to the way they express themselves on social media.