Extremist Thinking and Doing

A systematic study of empirical findings on the radicalisation process

Key Findings and Summary

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Key findings

- This study is a systematic literature review of 707 peer-reviewed scientific studies on susceptibility to extremist ideas on the one hand, and turning to extremist behaviour on the other, as well as possibilities for intervening in these processes.

- Over the past two decades, there has been a clear annual increase in the number of empirical scientific studies. These studies focus on extremism in general (313 studies), Islamic extremism (235) or right-wing extremism (106), and more than three quarters use a quantitative method.

- Our analysis of these empirical studies shows that radicalisation to extremism is a complex process. There is no single factor that causes susceptibility to extremism or extremist behaviour. In fact, the empirical studies usually do not find such causal links, but can at most show which factors increase the likelihood of extremism. This chance increases when there is a combination or accumulation of factors.

- Susceptibility to extremist ideas and groups is relatively more often (but not necessarily) found in young men with low education and low income, with specific philosophical beliefs, certain values (such as social dominance and authoritarianism), personality traits (such as strongly felt basic needs) and (mental) illnesses. Triggered events can accelerate a person's susceptibility, while specific (cognitive, emotional and behavioural) resilience factors reduce the likelihood.

- Extremist behaviour is also more common (but again not necessarily) among young men, who unlike the ('only') susceptible individuals are however quite diverse in terms of education and income level, and may also relatively often have a criminal past. They are more likely to have certain values (such as ingroup superiority), or a specific (strongly felt) basic need for sensation and significance. Furthermore, extremist behaviour is linked to certain group factors and processes (such as ideology or the perceived threat to the group), and opportunity and capacity factors (such as the presence or absence of security, or participation in a training camp) play a role.

- Little is known about the effectiveness of interventions in the radicalisation process. At the beginning of the process, interventions that focus on someone's personality and resilience seem promising (such as training sessions and information), while in the later phases occasional interventions in particular have an unambiguously positive impact, and repressive measures can go either way.
Summary

Extremism and terrorism have been pressing social problems for decades. Not only because of the victims of terrorist attacks - at least as fundamental is the impact on the way people live together. Terrorism puts pressure on important social needs such as peace, security and stability. This systematic review of the scientific literature aims to identify the factors that contribute to extremism, as well as the interventions to combat extremism.

Extremism refers to the ideas and movements that aim to bring about far-reaching political or social changes by overthrowing the system and/or disrupting society, whereby the use of violence is not rejected. Within science, the process of radicalisation towards extremism is regarded as highly complex and dynamic. It is therefore difficult to find an unequivocal explanation for it - let alone a simple remedy. The goal of this systematic literature review is to identify points of departure for a better understanding of and influence on this process. The central research questions of the study are:

1. Under what conditions are individuals receptive to extremist ideas and groups?
2. Under what conditions do people turn to extremist acts?
3. At what times and in what ways can intervention be used to reduce susceptibility to extremist ideas and prevent extremist actions?

In searching and describing the empirical literature, we made use of a conceptual framework in the form of a phase model of radicalisation towards extremism, which fits in well with the questions and does justice to the complexity of the radicalisation process. We then conducted a systematic search of scientific databases and asked experts from several countries for current research, choosing to focus exclusively on peer-reviewed articles in which original qualitative and/or quantitative data are presented or in which a new analysis of existing data has been carried out. In total, 707 articles were found through this search, which we read and coded according to the factors from the conceptual framework.

An initial analysis of this collection of empirical studies reveals a number of striking features. For example, in the last two decades, there has been a clear annual increase in the number of empirical scientific studies. Over three-quarters of all research uses a quantitative method (553 studies), often involving an analysis of an existing database (185 studies) or a questionnaire survey (115 studies). In terms of extremist ideology, the research most frequently focuses on extremism of an undefined signature (radicalisation in general; 313 studies), followed by Islamic extremism (235 studies) and right-wing extremism (106 studies).

What can we conclude from the literature with regard to the central research questions? Under what conditions are people receptive to extremist ideas and groups (research question 1)? On a macro level, the factors of polarisation and repression play a role. As far as demographic factors are concerned, susceptible persons are more often (but not necessarily) young, male, religious, with a low education and a low income. In addition, values such as social dominance orientation, ingroup superiority and (right-wing) authoritarianism come to the fore, as do personality traits such as
narcissism and introversion, and psychological syndromes such as symptoms of depression, PTSD and personality disorders, as well as insecure attachment, a rigid thinking style and low empathy. These individuals also have a relatively strongly felt need for clarity, meaning, identity and/or justice. In order to satisfy these basic needs, a person may turn to an extremist group, within which the person is made even more receptive to the extremist ideology. Our analysis also shows that radical events in a person's life can serve as triggers that initiate or accelerate this process. The importance of resilience also emerges, i.e. factors that can reduce one's susceptibility to extremism. Here we distinguish between cognitive factors (such as critical thinking), emotional factors (such as being able to deal with negative emotions) and behavioural factors (such as maintaining a diverse social network).

Under what conditions do people turn to extremist acts (research question 2)? On a macro-level, we conclude that countries are more likely (but not necessarily) to have extremist violence if they are large, have many and young inhabitants with diverse cultural backgrounds and origins, and are characterised by political instability, repression, polarisation, high unemployment and large income disparities. Furthermore, people who turn to extremist behaviour (such as violence) are more often (but not necessarily) young, male, and have a more frequent criminal history. Compared to people who are receptive to extremist ideas, however, those who act extremist are fairly diverse in terms of education and income. Terrorists see their own group as superior and are especially in need of adventure and meaning. They also show symptoms of PTSD more often.

Virtually all extremist behaviour takes place in groups, and we found several group factors associated with such behaviour - such as violent attacks. Strong us-versus-them thinking can make one feel superior as a group and feel threatened in that superiority, which is then related to the tendency to become violent. The ideology and size of the extremist group is also related to committing violence - large and religious groups are more likely to commit extremist violence than smaller, non-religious groups. It also appears that within such groups people are often groomed - both mentally and physically - to resort to violence. Trigger factors are also relatively often group-related. These may be, for example, an event on the local, national or global level that leads to a feeling of disrespect and threat to the group, or participation in a training course - facilitated by the group, of course - and targeted attacks on leaders of the extremist group in question. In addition, previous (personal) experiences with violence are also related to committing it, as are specific points of no return such as writing a farewell letter or a will.

Much less can be said about the possible role of resilience in turning to extremist action than about the first research question on susceptibility. Usually, by the time one resorts to extremist actions such as violence, this resilience has long been eroded. The only resilience factor with an unambiguous link in this context is that of moral rules: the rules that someone has formulated for himself about what behaviour is right or wrong can form an 'internal brake' against extremist violence. The self-confidence factor is much harder to interpret here; on the one hand, low or damaged self-confidence can be related to extremism, but on the other hand, 'inflated' self-confidence (narcissism) is also associated with extremist behaviour.
Finally, opportunity factors also play a role. Extremist violence is more often aimed at (symbolically) attractive and nearby targets that are not too well guarded. In this context, the presence or absence of police and security services also plays a role in the occurrence and prevention of extremist behaviour.

At what points and in what way can intervention be used to reduce susceptibility to extremist ideas and prevent extremist actions (research question 3)? As far as susceptibility is concerned, concrete interventions aimed at increasing cognitive and emotional resilience (for example through training) are particularly promising. Interventions aimed at personality factors (such as a person's basic needs and values) may also be effective. The effectiveness of some long-term interventions (such as interventions through dialogue and cooperation with communities) is less clear. The same applies to communication-oriented interventions (such as counternarratives), where the question must also be asked as to who is the most credible messenger; the government, or not? At the step towards extremist action, capacity- and opportunity-focused interventions can be deployed. Preventive actions such as securing targets seem to be effective here. If, however, we look at more repressive measures (arresting, imprisoning or killing leaders of terrorist groups), the empirical studies present a less unambiguous picture. Removing extremist leaders - by imprisoning or killing them - seems effective in the short term, for example, but can also be counterproductive in the long term, encouraging more violence.

All in all, the answers to the three central research questions paint a picture of radicalisation to extremism as an extremely complex process in which there is still much uncertainty as to how we can effectively intervene to stop or slow it down. There is clearly no factor that in itself is a necessary or sufficient condition for radicalisation. Individual factors increase the likelihood of radicalisation, but to be truly susceptible to extremism (or actual extremist acts), it is more likely that a combination of different factors is needed. And for every extremist that combination can also be different. Extremists all follow their own radicalisation path, with different circumstances, motives and end points.

This study has its limitations. For example, due to the large volume of literature found, a more in-depth analysis of the individual factors or the relationship between them was not possible. In follow-up research, more depth can be added, for example, through a meta-analysis or a network analysis in which the factors described here are included, or in research that looks at the effect of the cumulation of these factors. Also, much research work remains to be done to get a better picture of the effectiveness of different types of interventions. In any case, it will not be possible in practice to use a checklist to find the future terrorist. It is possible, however, based on the literature we have found and described, to determine which factors can increase the chance of susceptibility to extremist ideas and actions. And with that, the research also offers leads for interventions to prevent extremist violence.