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MODELLING RADICALISATION: APPLYING SITUATIONAL ACTION THEORY TO THE CHRISTCHURCH TERROR ATTACKS

Vikrant Desai¹

The March 2019 Christchurch terror attacks were something of a turning point for both law enforcement agencies in New Zealand and for terrorism studies scholars. The growth of religious terrorism, the rise of right-wing extremism, and the imaginative use of the internet by violent extremists pose new security challenges today. This article examines the merits of a criminological radicalisation model for lone actors of terrorism specific to the New Zealand setting. The article examines the concept of radicalisation in the terrorism literature and argues for a clear distinction between the cognitive and behavioural stages of radicalisation. It analyses some of the unique domestic factors which affect radicalisation in New Zealand and provides a brief threat evaluation of extremism. The article proceeds to identify some of the reasons behind 'why out of millions of people facing similar conditions, only the few become terrorists' by applying the Situational Action Theory of Crime to the Christchurch terror attacks. Finally, the article recommends some specific interventions for law enforcement agencies to try and thwart future terrorists.

Keywords: Radicalisation, terrorism, violent extremism, Situational Action Theory of crime, criminology, interventions

Introduction

Against the backdrop of the deadly Christchurch terror attacks by an Australian white supremacist who was self-radicalised over the internet, the factors responsible for individuals committing violent acts need to be reviewed. This article attempts to address the following research questions: (1) what contributory factors have been identified as

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relevant to individual radicalisation pertaining to modern terrorism; and (2) can a radicalisation model from criminology be useful for understanding specific terrorism threat scenario(s)? The article proceeds in three sections that, first, provides a brief review of the modern scholarly literature on radicalisation; second, gives a brief threat evaluation of violent extremism in New Zealand; and finally, explores a criminology-based radicalisation model for lone actors in a setting that is similar to that of New Zealand. More specifically, in the final section, the article discusses the March 2019 Christchurch terror attacks in some detail and applies the Situational Action Theory (SAT) – a promising crime causation theory from criminology – to terrorism. The article argues that the key process of transformation of an individual from cognitive to behavioural radicalisation provides actionable points of intervention for intelligence and law enforcement agencies to detect and deter potential terrorists.

Understanding Radicalisation

Our understanding of the process of ‘making of a terrorist’ has undergone several conceptual changes over recent years, from a macro focus on socio-political issues to the individual micro-level psychological make-up of extremists and their interaction with prevailing environmental factors. Importantly, one of the major questions in terrorism studies has remained unanswered: why do only the few commit acts of violence, while millions of others who are exposed to a similar environment and the same factors established as contributory to radicalisation do not get radicalised or become terrorists?¹ Sageman, a prominent terrorism studies scholar, expressed concern about the current state of research on the causes of terrorism, the fragmentation of radicalisation theory, and what he saw as the stagnation of scientific research in the field.² According to Bertran, a key weakness in the state of knowledge is that the current terrorism studies field frequently fails to distinguish between cognitive and behavioural radicalisation.³ Terrorism studies scholars, therefore, remain concerned about the causes of people participating in violent extremism around the world today, but scholarly opinion remains divided over the specific reasons for why only a small number of individuals end up committing terrorist acts.

Radicalisation - An Ambiguous Concept

The concept of radicalisation as the first step in the social and psychological process by which individuals come to support terrorism or become terrorists has seen some scrutiny and been the subject of debates in the terrorism literature. One of the common definitions of terrorism is “unlawful use of violence, committed by a group(s) of two or more individuals, against persons or property, to intimidate a government or civilian population in furtherance of political or social objectives.”⁴ However, this definition is somewhat problematised by the universal dilemma of one person’s terrorist being another’s freedom fighter.⁵ The Situational Action Theory of Crime (SAT), which pro-

poses that individuals commit crime as their morally acceptable alternative in the given circumstances, also highlights this dilemma.⁶ In other words, the recognised acts of terrorism – as per the definition – can be morally acceptable to certain societies around the world in which terrorists are perceived to be freedom fighters: for example, religious terrorism in Kashmir, India.⁷ Similarly, radicalisation is also an opaque term that has no unique, singular or universally accepted definition. According to Sedgwick, radicalisation – a term that describes “what goes on before the bomb goes off” – is a source of confusion because some authors focus on the state of mind of those who are radicalised, while others focus on their behaviour.⁸

The United Kingdom’s Home Office defined radicalisation in 2011 as “the process by which people come to support, and in some cases to participate in, terrorism.”⁹ It is thus a cognitive (an individual developing radical ideas and expressing support for violent extremism) as well as a behavioural (an individual joining a violent extremist group and/or actively taking part in violence) phenomenon. Radicalised people can show both components, but do not always do so. For example, several people have been cognitively radicalised, but with no corresponding level of behavioural radicalisation, and vice-versa.¹⁰ Walker considers radicalisation to be a process in which not all those who get involved end up engaging in actual violence.¹¹ Similarly, Borum has noted that even among those individuals who subscribe to a destructive ideology, not all will personally engage in acts of extremist violence.¹²

Contributory Factors for Radicalisation

In previous decades, studies on terrorism focussed on effects of the wider political context, such as poverty or territorial disputes, as the root cause of terrorism. While linking the older terrorism studies to the then-emerging literature on radicalisation, Laqueur claimed that Al Qaeda was formed not because of some territorial dispute or feelings of national oppression, but due to the religious beliefs among individuals about the establishment of Sharia¹³ and the doctrine of Jihad.¹⁴ He theorised that not all groups that suffer from poverty and oppression resort to violence and there was a need to move away from a macro focus on economics and politics to the cultural and psychological predispositions of individuals.¹⁵ Consequently, terrorism studies scholars have considered various socio-environmental issues, such as social bonds, the desire for political, social, economic or religious change to occur, and a perceived hope that violent means would bring this change to the existing system. The desire to respond to personal and collective grievances, such as perceived hatred for their community, personal achievements, such as fulfilment of the need for excitement/adventure or financial and social gains, and the role played by charismatic leaders, have also been given due attention.¹⁶

A detailed study undertaken by Vergani et al. investigated the scholarly literature on the factors of radicalisation published between 2001 and 2015. It claims that the qualitative research methods used in terrorism studies tend to over-represent push

factors (that is, poverty, injustice, and state repression) and pull factors (that is, ideology and group belonging) while giving inadequate attention to personal factors, such as psychological disorders, upbringing, personality traits and traumatic life experiences, which attributed to the lack of adequate research, and problems in accessing reliable individual biographical data by the researchers.¹⁷ Some recent research points towards personal factors as providing psychological explanations of adopting violent extremist beliefs and even appearing to be the sole reason for radicalisation among individuals with strong psychological disorders.¹⁸ The personal factors also play a prominent role in Lone Wolf terrorism cases.¹⁹ These individuals have been found to possess personality traits, such as self-obsessed/narcissist personality, low tolerance for ambiguity, impulsiveness, black-and-white thinking, and a history of violent behaviour and substance abuse.²⁰

Radicalisation Theories and Models

In the post 9/11 era, research has focused on uncovering the plausible causes of radicalisation with the aim of preventing people from becoming terrorists. A great deal of the research on radicalisation after 9/11 focused primarily on religious terrorism.²¹ In his “Four Stage Model of the Terrorist Mindset”, for example, Borum attempted to identify common factors in the radicalisation process among the various religious extremist groups.²² However, his model did not account for a terrorist’s life cycle of joining, continuing and/or leaving terrorism. Moghaddam’s “Staircase to Terrorism” model considers feelings of discontent, adversity and perceived deprivation as the initial stepping stones on the pathway to terrorism, and attempts to demonstrate how fewer and fewer individuals elevate themselves through the successive levels of radicalisation process to eventually become terrorists.²³ Precht’s “Model of a Typical Radicalisation Pattern” asserted that group dynamics and self-identification were crucial in one’s commitment to radical ideology.²⁴

Similarly, Sageman’s “Bunch of Guys Theory” considered socialisation, group dynamics and religious ideology as the necessary factors for transforming individuals into terrorists, while explaining the progressive process of radicalisation among the bunch of guys who come together through bonds of kinship and friendship.²⁵ Horgan, on the other hand, claimed that no universal terrorist profile had yet been found and most research on radicalisation was carried out by social science specialists, with only a few psychologists involved in it.²⁶ Exploratory primary research into the role of internet in the radicalisation of 15 extremists in UK suggests that the internet creates more opportunities to become radicalised and acts as an “echo chamber” - a medium to confirm existing beliefs.²⁷ In their “Conversion Theory”, Rambo & Farhadian explained the individual process of transformation of beliefs/ideologies and conversion to a religion,²⁸ which also has relevance to violent radicalisation.

Assessing the Literature on Radicalisation

An assessment of the post-9/11 scholarly literature, as well as the many different theories and models on radicalisation, highlights: (1) the lack of clarity or agreement about the risk factors for radicalisation, and a generally inadequate understanding of why people become terrorists; (2) that there is little to no consensus with regard to the definition of radicalisation or terrorism; (3) that the post-9/11 scholarly research has focused almost exclusively on religious terrorism; (4) that there are a great many pathways to radicalisation that have been identified, which various scholars have attempted to theorize in order to derive radicalisation models, but they have been unable to provide more context-dependent models specific to particular settings; (5) that the decision to become a terrorist is not abrupt, but rather the radicalisation process is progressive and graduates under the influence of different factors from one stage to another, particularly from cognitive to behavioural; (6) that some recent studies reject socio-economic factors, such as political conditions and poverty, as the root causes of terrorism, while overemphasising certain push and pull factors as the main components of the process; (7) that there is a lack of focus on psychological aspects; (8) that there is a lack of quantitative research on personal factors, and there are problems in accessing reliable biographical data by researchers; and (9) that there is increasing evidence that the emergence of internet is one of the most powerful mediums that can act as an “echo chamber” for the extremist beliefs and thereby enhance opportunities for individuals to become radicalised.

Within this complex picture, and with the emergence of different forms of terrorism, such as Right-Wing Extremism (RWE) as well as lone actors – a relatively new development in the process of radicalisation, the factors responsible for people supporting or committing violent acts clearly need to be reviewed. It is also evident that the radicalisation theories and models suggested by various scholars conceptually differ in their view of radicalisation stages and the primary contributory factors. Their studies have used different criteria and samples in different contexts to construct their theories and models. Therefore, with the unique domestic conditions and threat scenarios prevalent at a given time, it is imperative to try and develop a radicalisation model applicable to a particular setting.

Threat Evaluation of Violent Extremism in New Zealand*Historical Background*

Historically, New Zealand has experienced relatively few serious incidents of violent extremism and political violence. Most of these were dealt with as “normal” criminal acts and the New Zealand Government did not initiate any major counterterrorism ac-

tion, as no specific terror act was committed on New Zealand soil that had direct impact on its national interests, notwithstanding the Rainbow Warrior attack.²⁹ In 2013, ISIS online propaganda motivated some Kiwi nationals to become foreign terrorist fighters in Iraq and Syria.³⁰ There were also some media reports of a rising number of Kiwi Jihadi brides in Iraq and Syria in 2015. Almost 40 people in New Zealand who were suspected to have links with terror organizations or to have accessed online violent propaganda were kept on the watch list by the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service. Kiwi terrorist Mark Taylor, alias the “Bumbling Jihadi,” who became a foreign fighter with ISIS and actively proposed terror attacks in Australia and New Zealand, was declared a global terrorist by the US.³¹ The joining of the ISIS cadre by some New Zealand nationals was viewed by the Government as a threat to national security amidst heavy online propaganda for recruitment by Islamic terror organisations. However, a comparison was made with the number of citizens of European countries joining ISIS – a number much higher than that of New Zealand, which was then viewed as being a low level of terrorism threat.³²

In July 2005, an 18-year-old student – apparently a right-wing extremist – was charged with vandalising and tagging six Auckland mosques to avenge the London bombings of 2005.³³ In May 2016, two men were prosecuted in the Auckland District Court for possessing, making and distributing anti-Shia extremist religious videos released by ISIS.³⁴ In April 2018, a man suffering from Asperger’s syndrome – a neuro-developmental disorder related to social interaction and non-verbal communication – was found with ISIS propaganda material and a terrorist handbook of bombs/explosives. He had also posted videos online calling for retaliation against the attacks on mosques in Canada and the US.³⁵ Another youth, who was radicalised online and converted to Islam in early 2019, had unsuccessfully planned to carry out a terror attack.³⁶ More recently, a Sri Lankan refugee, Mohamed Samsudeen, who had been trying to join ISIS, was kept on a watch-list by the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service; in September 2021, he stabbed seven people in an Auckland supermarket before he was shot dead by the police.³⁷ These incidents, and the Christchurch terror attack discussed below, highlight the religious, as well as the RWE threat scenario that needs to be studied in more detail.

Christchurch Terror Attacks

On 15 March 2019, New Zealand lost 51 innocent lives in an unprecedented terror attack that also injured as many in Muslim religious places of worship in Christchurch. Many reports and articles have been published on this incident. This article will refer to the *Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjidain on 15 March 2019* (2020) and focus exclusively upon the radicalisation process of the perpetrator.³⁸ The flow chart below describes the Christchurch terror attack perpetrator’s radicalisation process, as outlined in the Commission’s Report; that is, from an introvert and sociopathic personality to a cognitively and subsequently to a

behaviourally radicalised person. He ultimately committed his planned violent act while also live streaming it. Circulating self-documented live footage of the attack created a direct bonding with online viewers, providing recognition for the attacker as acting on behalf of their right-extremist community. Hutchinson identified the Christchurch attacks as “performance crime”, drawing upon Surette’s model.³⁹

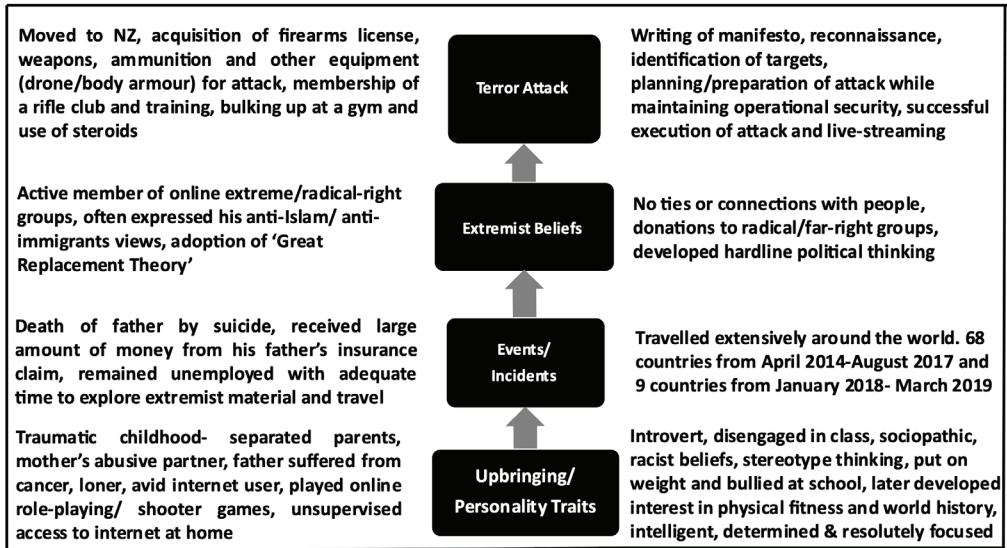


Figure 1: Flow Chart of Radicalisation: The Christchurch Terror Attack Perpetrator. Source: Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjid-ain on 15 March 2019 (2020)⁴⁰

The flow chart above suggests the key role played by personal factors, such as personality traits and upbringing, and the various environmental factors pertaining to New Zealand in the individual’s elevation from the stage of cognitive to behavioural radicalisation. In addition, the availability of adequate money and time was a facilitating factor. The individual had received a substantial amount of money from the settlement of a claim by his father (AU\$457,000) at an early age, which he used for travelling around the world and preparing for his attack subsequently. He was unemployed in New Zealand and spent much of his time on the internet without being detected, while accessing extremist material, gaining expertise in related technology, carrying out reconnaissance of targets and planning his attack in minute details.⁴¹

Similarly, the ability to obtain a firearms licence and gain access to weapons, ammunition and equipment was another facilitating factor. The individual acquired a firearms licence without much difficulty immediately after arriving in New Zealand, and stock-piled many weapons, including semi-automatic rifles which he modified to suit his pur-

pose, and ammunition for the planned attack. He joined a rifle club in order to develop the necessary skills, and collected the required equipment, such as tactical vests, body armour, helmet and a drone towards his preparations, all with relative ease.⁴²

A final facilitating factor was the way in which New Zealand was perceived to be a suitable place to plan, prepare and execute the attack due to the individual's identity. With his Australian nationality, the individual was able to easily fit in with all the people he engaged with. Moreover, with no close associations in New Zealand there was a little chance that someone would have raised an alarm about his behaviour. The only people worried about him were his mother and sister, who being in Australia, were not in direct contact with him. With no connections with people around him, the availability of his intended targets, and permissive firearms laws, the individual was able to merge well in the country, maintain operational security and carry out his attack.⁴³ We will touch upon these issues again in the final section while discussing the proposed interventions for law enforcement agencies.

Contextual Factors of New Zealand Relevant to Extremism

In addition to personal factors and facilitating factors, there are also some contextual, structural factors relevant to New Zealand society which need to be considered. The first is New Zealand's gun culture. The Christchurch terror attack revealed that the perpetrator, despite having arrived in New Zealand only recently with no family ties and a very few social connections, was easily able to obtain a firearms license. There was no limit on possession of the number of weapons, including semi-automatics, as well as the quantity of ammunition or large capacity magazines.⁴⁴ The Government, thereafter, initiated critical measures in order to reform the gun laws, which included passing the Arms Amendment Act 2019 that bans semi-automatic firearms, magazines and parts. It also announced an amnesty and buyback program for the prohibited firearms.⁴⁵ Additional gun reforms that were enacted included the creation of a national firearm register, more restrictions on obtaining a firearms license, and a ban on overseas visitors buying guns in New Zealand.⁴⁶ However, there is a continuing need for close coordination among the arms licencing and vetting authorities, the police and intelligence agencies. There is also a widespread concern about illegal weapons in New Zealand, especially military style semi-automatic weapons purchased via mail orders.⁴⁷ Illegal buying and selling these firearms, and their availability in the black market, is a potential facilitator for behavioural radicalisation of those in the risk group(s).

A second contextual factor involves New Zealand's anti-terrorism laws. The New Zealand Government enacted the Terrorism Suppression Act (TSA) in 2002, primarily as a response to the global war on terror in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks.⁴⁸ The Act has, however, been found to have several limitations. It can only be used *after* a terror attack has occurred. Prosecutorial effectiveness in terms of which incidents can be covered under the Act is another matter of concern. The perpetrator of the Christchurch

attack was charged with only one charge of engaging in a terrorist act as against ninety-one charges of murder/attempted murder under the Crimes Act.⁴⁹ There also exists a “pre-criminal space” in the system in which potential terrorists can plan and prepare for their violent act without committing criminal offences.⁵⁰ This concern is, however, at the time of writing being addressed on priority by bringing an amendment to the definition of “Terrorist Act” and the introduction of new offences for terrorist weapons/ combat training and planning/preparation for a terrorist act in New Zealand.⁵¹

Another contextual factor relates to gangs in New Zealand. Gang culture has been a unique domestic feature of New Zealand since the mid-20th century. Mongrel Mob and Black Power – presently the largest indigenous gangs in New Zealand – started their organised illegal activities in the 1970s.⁵² White supremacist groups or “white gangs” have existed and remained on the radar of security agencies in New Zealand since the early 1990s. Their activities were investigated in the context of RWE and these groups were identified as criminally active but not a terror threat.⁵³ Also, gang violence is mostly limited to intergroup rivalry, personal gains and territorial control, and is not directed at intimidating innocent civilians or the Government, and importantly, there is a lack of stated political objective or an ideology. Therefore, gangs in New Zealand appear to be in a low-risk category for radicalisation at present. The availability of weapons within gangs, which can be used illegally is, however, a matter of serious concern, as it could facilitate behavioural radicalisation among the vulnerable individuals of the society.

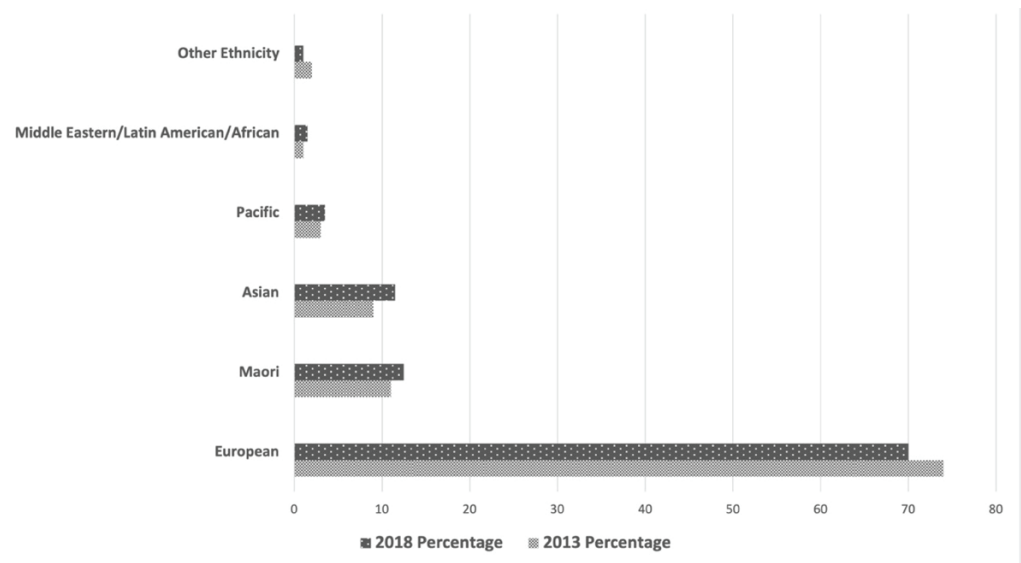


Figure 2: Growth of Population Diversity in New Zealand. Source: Statistics New Zealand Projections ⁵⁴

Finally, we have to consider population diversity as a relevant structural factor. From a Māori-European bi-cultural society, New Zealand is gradually moving towards multiculturalism. Presently, one in four individuals in New Zealand is identified as culturally and linguistically diverse. The Middle Eastern/Latin American/ African and Asian ethnic groups increased by more than 30% over the period of seven years between 2006 and 2013 – a growing concern for right-wing activists today.⁵⁵ The graph below shows the increased population diversity of the different ethnic groups in New Zealand from 2013 to 2018.

Modelling Radicalisation for Lone Actors

In the context of New Zealand, where organised terrorist groups and their activities appear non-existent at present, it is prudent to consider the radicalisation of lone actors. It is important to address this concern at the outset by understanding why and how people become radicalised and commit terror acts. The Situational Action Theory of crime (SAT) – a model developed within crime science – attempts to provide an answer to the “big debate” in terrorism studies by theorizing why some individuals consider acts of unlawful behaviour as morally legitimate and choose to carry them out.⁵⁶

The Situational Action Theory of Crime

Formulated in the early 2000s (2004 – 2008) by Wikström and Bouhana, SAT is a promising theory of crime causation which can arguably also be applied to cases of terrorism. It builds upon insights from traditional criminology and draws upon social and behavioural science research. The theory proposes that people ultimately commit crime because they perceive their criminal act as a ‘morally acceptable alternative’ in the given circumstances. They overcome controls acting internally/externally on them and are adequately motivated to break their personal moral barriers before executing the criminal act. The theory relies on the basic assumptions that certain people commit crime because of both who they are and where they are. Humans are guided by rules and our society is based on shared rules of conduct that guide our acts, which can also be termed as our moral actions. All crime, including acts of terrorism, are breaches of the rules of conduct.⁵⁷

According to Karl-Dieter, while exploring person-environment interactions, the theory involves three sets of propositions, namely: perception-choice process; PEA hypothesis; and the sequential model about the process of crime causation.⁵⁸ The first set of propositions states that an action is the ultimate outcome of a perception-choice process of an individual. Crime takes place when a person perceives and chooses crime as an action alternative. This process is governed by a crime-promoting environment, self and social selection that provides the required setting/exposure to commit crime, and cognitive nurturing – an individual’s basic neurological constitution and cognitive deficiencies

affecting the ability to understand and apply the rules of conduct. The PEA hypothesis is summarised as $P \times E \rightarrow A$ wherein, interaction (X) between the personal propensities (P), and the exposure to relevant settings (E), is the resulting action (A). The third set of propositions suggests a sequential model of crime causation in which “motivation”, either habitual or deliberate, initiates a process that considers different action alternatives, including the criminal acts perceived by an individual. A moral/interest filter is applied; here, strong personal norms against crime prevent the perception of crime, but strong interests may lead to ignoring those norms. Internal controls, such as self-control, and external controls, such as formal laws/legislations and informal social concerns, act as deterrence and play a crucial role before the perceived alternatives result in action.⁵⁹

Why out of the hundreds of needy customers in a supermarket do only a few get involved in shoplifting? Similarly, out of millions of disgruntled people, why would only a few blow themselves up or start shooting people in a public place? It is important to understand how such an act becomes an “acceptable action alternative”. The tendency to regard a particular criminal act as an acceptable action alternative thus depends on personal morals and how various internal/external controls get applied to an individual in the given circumstances.⁶⁰

To summarise, in order to acquire a propensity for terrorism, individuals need to be exposed to terrorism-supportive moral contexts, i.e., exposure. To enable this exposure, the required settings must be present in the environment, i.e., emergence. In addition, the individuals have to come into regular contact with these settings, i.e., selection. Most importantly, to become radicalised, the individuals must be sensitive to the influence of these terrorism-supportive settings, i.e., possess a vulnerability to moral change.⁶¹

To illustrate, consider the application of SAT to the Christchurch terrorist attack. SAT attempts to bridge the gap between those who commit violent acts and those who do not within the same settings. SAT states that people commit crime when it is morally acceptable to them and when they also fail to exercise self-control – an internal control factor. The issue of “effective deterrence as an external control factor” highlights the critical aspect of the radicalisation of suicide bombers who are willing to die for a cause that they think is morally acceptable and justifiable when even death does not act as a maximum deterrence. Therefore, “adequate deterrence as external control” brought out in the theory translates for the perpetrator(s) to being detected during planning/preparation of the violent act before its successful execution. The perpetrator of the Christchurch terror attack carefully planned and prepared for his attack – his morally acceptable alternative – while maintaining the utmost operational security in order to avoid detection until it was successfully executed.⁶² Thereafter, he was prepared to die or get caught, as evident from his online message on an image-board, as well as from his email sent to 34 recipients taking responsibility for the attack minutes before he executed it.⁶³

Overall, SAT highlights that the perpetrator's evolution from the stage of cognitive to behavioural radicalisation, and overcoming the moral barriers to ultimately commit a violent act, were primarily governed by his personal factors and self-selection for exposure to a crime promoting environment. The Christchurch terror attacker was motivated – provoked to commit a violent act – as evident from his intensive preparations, his manifesto “The Great Replacement” published online, and his methodical execution of the attack.⁶⁴ It was his deliberate decision to commit a violent act which was triggered by his high propensity for terrorism and the immediate online criminogenic environment that he was involved in. The individual was exposed to a criminogenic setting – including extreme-right ideology – from his early life. His process of social and self-selection, i.e., the preference-based choices that people make to attend specific time and place-based activities, was influenced by his unsupervised access to the internet at home and his membership of online radical platforms,⁶⁵ which resulted in the development of his crime propensity – or, the tendency to see a kind of crime as a viable action alternative in the given setting.

A Proposed Radicalisation Model Applicable to New Zealand

It is important to note that “one size does not fit all” when it comes to the making of a violent extremist. Many theories and conceptual models have evolved in terrorism studies since 9/11. Most of them, however, offer descriptive narratives of a typical transformative process in the context of a particular extremist group. Lone actors have been a prominent feature of new terrorism since 9/11. Between 2009 and 2015, 74% of domestic terror attacks (religious as well as right-wing) in the US were carried out by lone actors.⁶⁶ As discussed previously, in the absence of any known terror group, radicalisation of a lone actor merits attention in New Zealand. Based on the broad threat analysis discussed in this article, the suggested conceptual model illustrated below on the radicalisation of lone actors is applicable to New Zealand. The model illustrates the process of radicalisation of lone actors in the context of the current threat of religious as well as extreme-right terrorism in New Zealand. The environmental factors combined with the personal factors play a crucial role in the evolution of cognitively radicalised people to behaviourally radicalised individuals.

Discussion

The model attempts to explain the step-by-step process of radicalisation by which an individual may become a lone actor of religious or extreme-right terrorism in a progressive manner. In view of New Zealand's geographical isolation from the rest of the world, the internet will certainly act as the key medium for the overall radicalisation process of the individuals in the at-risk groups. The failure of Facebook to prevent the spread of the Christchurch attack live footage that was uploaded 1.5 million times over 24 hours after the incident has exposed the internet as the most powerful tool in the hands of extremists for carrying out their propaganda targeted at a large audience.⁶⁷

Whether in the case of religious or RWE, the relevant online communities and subcultures offer convenient platforms for like-minded people to come together during their radicalisation process. As Sageman’s “Bunch of Guys” theory suggests, group dynamics that build relations and friendship with other members and fulfil their desire for perceived recognition and personal identity, assumes importance.⁶⁸ Social networking coupled with modern technology provides easy and anonymous access to extremist material, online hate and radical groups, as well as image-boards such as 4Chan/8Chan⁶⁹ to freely express views, gather support, and plan/exhibit violent acts. The members of online extremist subcultures and radical groups/forums in the first three steps of the model are understood to have undergone cognitive radicalisation, supporting extremism/expressing radical views. The individuals who are behaviourally radicalized under the influence of personal and environmental factors ultimately reach the final step of becoming terrorists.

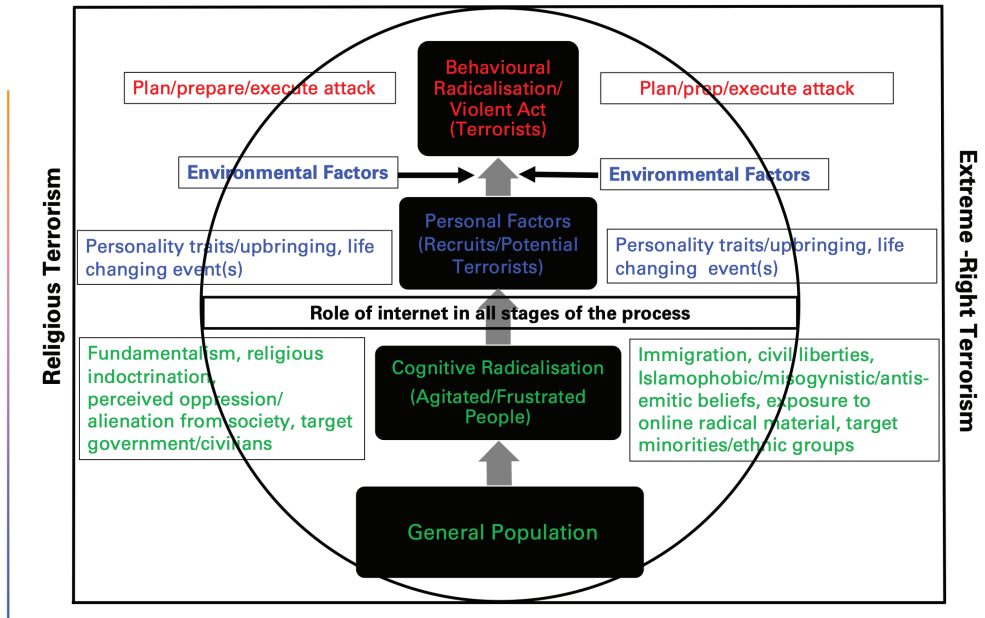


Figure 3: Radicalisation Model for Lone Actors Applicable to New Zealand

In accordance with Borum’s “Four Stage Model of Terrorist Mindset”⁷⁰ and Moghaddam’s “Staircase to Terrorism,”⁷¹ the making of a terrorist in the context of New Zealand can be seen as a progressive process of the “active conversion” of lone actors with fewer and fewer people graduating to the next levels. The SAT of crime causation points towards personal and environmental factors playing a crucial role in the individual’s evolution from cognitive to behavioural radicalisation, which help them overcome moral

barriers to commit a crime. Some personality traits, such as narcissistic personality and impulsive/violent behaviour, as well as cognitive deficiencies in applying rules of conduct, along with an extreme desire for recognition or adventure/excitement, have also been identified as important contributory factors in the behavioural radicalisation process of the lone actors. Further, environmental factors, such as access to weapons and training, contacts with terrorists, availability of a suitable target, the probability of not getting detected before successful execution of the attack and the corresponding lack of adequate deterrence, are likely to induce behavioural radicalisation among the few who would move on to become terrorists.

Relevance for Law Enforcement Agencies

The detection of a potential terrorist is difficult, especially in a setting where there exists a clear pre-criminal space in which a perpetrator can plan and prepare for an attack without committing a criminal offence. It is, therefore, extremely important to criminalise precursor terrorism behaviours, such as the acquisition of weapons, the procurement/storage of explosives or surveillance of potential targets. Some of the necessary steps have already been initiated by the New Zealand Government in this regard.⁷²

However, a major concern here is the continuous tug-of-war between civil liberties and security aspects. With limited resources, counter-terrorism agencies must make tough choices regarding where to concentrate their efforts.⁷³ This article has sought to highlight the two distinct stages of radicalisation, i.e., the cognitive and the behavioural. The behavioural stage of radicalisation involves all those actions taken by the perpetrator after he/she decides to commit a violent act. It is influenced by the personal factors and exposure to various environmental factors, as explained earlier. With a very large number of people from different settings worldwide who are alienated or agitated and cognitively radicalised, New Zealand may not be an exception. In view of the limited resources and wide concerns around civil liberties, it will be advantageous for law enforcement agencies to focus particularly on the behavioural radicalisation stage, which would essentially involve the precursor terrorism behaviours of planning, preparation and execution of a violent act. Defining what precisely would encompass these behaviours and taking timely action to prevent a violent act is the key challenge.

As the model suggests, the internet plays the most dynamic role throughout the process of the radicalisation of an individual. Therefore, developing capabilities to intercept the dark web and track the individual activities of hate groups and extremist sites will help law enforcement agencies to not only identify the specific individuals who are in the process of evolving from the stage of cognitive to behavioural radicalisation, but also to prevent them from committing violent acts subsequently.

An important aspect of the model – in accordance with SAT – suggests that a behaviourally radicalised person takes all precautions, such as maintaining operational security, to avoid detection until the violent act is successfully executed. Such a person may not appear directly on the radar of the police or intelligence agencies. However, personality traits, suspicious behaviour and the internet activities of the individual can be noticed by those associated with that individual, i.e., family members, close friends or work colleagues. Law enforcement agencies ought to consider engaging the public more. Ensuring public awareness of the “indicators of radicalisation” as brought out in the model, and encouraging public reporting through “If You See Something, Say Something” type of initiatives – a campaign by the US Department of Homeland Security to inspire, empower and educate the public on reporting suspicious activities⁷⁴ – will certainly prove to be an effective intervention for detecting such individuals before they are able to execute their planned act. “Know the Signs”- a guide for identifying signs of violent extremism formulated by the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service is indeed an important step in making all New Zealanders aware of the extremist behaviours and responsible to report them to the concerned authorities⁷⁵. These initiatives however, have a potential to be misused against certain communities especially over social media. The law enforcement agencies will have a key role to play in their successful implementation.

The model posits that besides some commonalities, such as personality traits, the environmental factors for cognitive as well as behavioural radicalisation are different for religious terrorism from those of extreme-right terrorism. It is a fact that a greater number of violent attacks inspired by the extreme-right have taken place in Western democracies since 1990 than by any other ideology including religious extremism.⁷⁶ Research also suggests that there are distinct variations in the modus operandi of the lone actors of religious terrorism compared to those of the extreme-right, with the latter not being socially, culturally or ethnically different from the majority of the population, thereby making their detection more difficult.⁷⁷ Right wing extremists were not only the first to instrumentalise the internet in 1988, but have also displayed a persistent online presence since then.⁷⁸ In view of the ineffectiveness of measures such as mass auto-blocking of online extremist content, removal of sites or automated removal of online content by governments in the West, it might be more prudent to disrupt the active RWEs online – whose number is very small – before they share their views and begin to radicalise others.⁷⁹ As suggested by Liang and Cross, counter-narratives could also be a successful tool in the fight against right-wing extremism. This involves penetrating far right online networks, identifying those key extremists on social media/ various internet platforms, and then preventing them from posting content.⁸⁰ This approach has the potential to disrupt the cognitive as well as the behavioural radicalisation stages of the individual radicalisation process.

Conclusion

New Zealand was fairly prompt in its response to the Christchurch terror attacks in terms of amending gun laws, initiating the criminalisation of certain precursor terrorism behaviours, and introducing its global initiative – the Christchurch Call – to bring together the technology giants and world leaders to counter online extremism.⁸¹ The suggested radicalisation model identifies the internet as the most important medium for cognitive as well as behavioural radicalisation. However, taming the internet is not easy, as seen in Facebook's inability to detect and remove the live video feed of the Christchurch attack, or stop the spread of the footage later.⁸² In the absence of clear international support around the issue of freedom of expression, the effectiveness of the Christchurch Call or the efforts to automatically divert online searchers of radical contents or anti-hate groups, is yet to be seen. The development of artificial intelligence to differentiate first-person footage of real-world violent events from the virtual violent videos in the movies or video games, and blocking only the former, remains a challenge today.⁸³

There are also some key questions for further research, such as: how can we clearly identify people who are behaviourally radicalised and may act at any moment? When is it justifiable to arrest them, and can we create a database like the Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in the United States for New Zealand?⁸⁴ Related to this, how can the privacy rights of citizens be maintained while doing so? The basic structure of the proposed radicalisation model applicable to New Zealand is also relevant for other similar countries/regions that are geographically isolated and vulnerable to attacks from lone actors, with the internet playing a crucial role in their radicalisation process. The role of environmental factors in the behavioural radicalisation of the individuals ultimately committing the violent act would, however, differ for each setting. It is, therefore, necessary to develop a radicalisation model that is suitable to a particular environment, which is reviewed periodically after evaluating threat and the prevailing situation on terrorism. It will not only help in finding new ways to tackle the problem of terrorism specific to different settings, but also save precious human lives by preventing violent incidents before they occur.

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