

The Radicalization Chain: A Scientific Framework

Understanding Ideological Escalation Through Evidence-Based Research

DisinfoLabs Research Project

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We present established models including Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism, McCauley and Moskalenko's Two Pyramids framework, and contemporary research on online radicalization. Understanding these mechanisms is critical for identifying early intervention points and disrupting recruitment into extremist movements and coordinated harmful operations.

Keywords: radicalization, extremism, terrorism studies, social psychology, online recruitment, ideological escalation

ABSTRACT

The radicalization chain describes the process by which individuals transition from mainstream beliefs to extremist ideologies and, in some cases, violent action. This article synthesizes current scientific literature on radicalization pathways, examining psychological mechanisms, social dynamics, and environmental factors that facilitate ideological escalation.

Contemporary radicalization research recognizes that this process is neither linear nor deterministic. Most individuals exposed to extremist content do not radicalize, and those who adopt extreme beliefs do not necessarily engage in violent action.

Understanding the multi-factorial nature of radicalization—including individual psychology, social networks, grievances, and environmental contexts—is essential for developing effective counter-radicalization strategies.

Definitional Framework:

Radicalization is defined as the process by which individuals come to adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious ideologies that reject or undermine contemporary society and its values. This process typically involves:

- **Cognitive radicalization:** Adoption of extreme beliefs
- **Behavioral radicalization:** Engagement in increasingly extreme actions
- **Affective radicalization:** Emotional commitment to extremist causes

Crucially, radicalization exists on a spectrum. Not all radicalized individuals engage in violence; many remain at the level of ideological commitment without action.

SECTION I

Introduction

Radicalization research emerged as a distinct field following terrorist attacks in the early 2000s, though the psychological and sociological mechanisms underlying ideological commitment have been studied for decades. The fundamental question driving this research: how do individuals come to adopt beliefs and behaviors that justify or employ violence for ideological purposes?

SECTION II

Theoretical Models of Radicalization

Three major frameworks dominate contemporary radicalization research, each offering unique insights into the escalation process.

Ground Floor: Psychological Interpretation of Material Conditions • Individuals perceive injustice, deprivation, or inequality • Feelings of frustration and relative deprivation emerge • Most people remain at this level, processing grievances through legal channels

First Floor: Perceived Options to Fight Unfair Treatment • Assessment of available mechanisms for addressing grievances • Perception that legitimate channels are blocked or ineffective • Mobility options appear limited

Second Floor: Displacement of Aggression • Externalization of blame to outgroups • "Us vs. Them" thinking solidifies • Aggression redirected toward perceived oppressors

Third Floor: Moral Engagement • Categorization of individuals into deserving/undeserving of compassion • Moral disengagement mechanisms activated • Violence becomes morally justified

Fourth Floor: Categorical Thinking and the Terrorist Organization • Black-and-white worldview crystallizes • Commitment to terrorist organization/ideology • Social pressure and loyalty to group

Fifth Floor: The Terrorist Act • Actual execution of violence • Only a small fraction reach this level

The model explains progressive commitment and accounts for why most don't proceed to violence. However, it assumes sequential progression and has limited empirical validation for rapid radicalization cases.

Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism (2005)

Fathali Moghaddam's influential model conceptualizes radicalization as a narrowing staircase, where fewer individuals progress to each successive level:

Opinion Pyramid: • Base: Sympathetic to grievances • Middle: Believe extreme measures justified • Apex: Ideologically committed extremists

Action Pyramid: • Base: Inactive but sympathetic • Middle: Legal activism (protests, advocacy) • Upper: Political violence (property damage) • Apex: Terrorism (violence targeting civilians)

Individuals can be high on one pyramid but low on another. Many hold extreme beliefs without acting; conversely, some engage in violence with limited ideological commitment (e.g., mercenaries).

Mechanisms of Radicalization:

Individual Level: • Personal grievance (e.g., discrimination experience) • Group grievance (vicarious trauma for one's identity group) • Slippery slope (incremental escalation of commitment)

Group Level: • Group polarization (extremity shift in discussion) • Group competition (outbidding among factions) • Group isolation (echo chambers)

Mass Level: • Jujitsu politics (state overreaction recruiting more extremists) • Hate (intergroup conflict escalation) • Martyrdom (glorification of sacrifice)

McCauley & Moskalenko's Two Pyramids (2008, 2011)

This model distinguishes between opinion radicalization and action radicalization through two separate pyramids:

Need (Motivation): • Quest for personal significance (status, meaning, purpose) • Significance loss (humiliation, disrespect, marginalization) • Triggers: unemployment, discrimination, trauma, identity crisis

Narrative (Ideology): • Interpretive framework explaining significance loss • Prescription for restoring significance through extreme action • Religious, political, or single-issue ideologies

Network (Social Validation): • Reference group endorsing the narrative • Social support and validation from peers • Authority figures legitimizing ideology

All three components must align for radicalization. Absent any one element, radicalization is unlikely to progress.

The model is parsimonious and has cross-ideological applicability with empirical support, though it doesn't specify temporal sequence or provide strong predictive utility for individual cases.

Kruglanski et al.'s 3N Model (2014, 2019)

The **Need**, **Narrative**, **Network** model identifies three essential components:

SECTION III

Psychological Mechanisms

Individual psychological processes play crucial roles in radicalization susceptibility and progression.

Identity Fusion: Extreme form of group alignment where personal and social identities become viscerally merged, predicting willingness to sacrifice for group. Research shows identity fusion predicted willingness to fight and die for group across multiple cultural contexts (correlation $r = .51-.68$, $p < .001$).

Uncertainty-Identity Theory: Self-uncertainty is aversive. Individuals seek groups that reduce uncertainty through clear norms. Extremist groups offer certainty and absolutist worldviews.

Need for Cognitive Closure: Desire for definite answers vs. ambiguity, associated with dogmatism and resistance to alternative viewpoints. Extremist ideologies provide simple explanations for complex problems. Research shows personal uncertainty predicted ideological extremism among potential ISIS recruits ($\beta = .31$, $p < .01$).

Identity Processes

Social Identity Theory: Individuals derive self-esteem from group memberships, leading to ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation. Threatened identity drives seeking strong ingroup affiliation.

- **Moral justification:** Reframing violence as serving higher purpose
- **Euphemistic labeling:** "Cleansing," "struggle," "resistance"
- **Advantageous comparison:** "Better than what they did to us"
- **Displacement of responsibility:** "Following orders"
- **Diffusion of responsibility:** Individual action within group
- **Disregard for consequences:** Minimizing or ignoring harm
- **Dehumanization:** Viewing victims as less than human
- **Attribution of blame:** "They brought it on themselves"

Studies of former extremists consistently show employment of multiple moral disengagement mechanisms simultaneously.

Moral Disengagement

Bandura identified eight mechanisms allowing individuals to engage in harmful behavior while maintaining moral self-image:

SECTION IV

Online Radicalization: Digital Acceleration

Digital environments present distinctive features that accelerate and intensify radicalization processes.

- **Anonymity:** Reduced social inhibition and reputational risk
- **Algorithmic Amplification:** Recommendation systems funnel users toward increasingly extreme content
- **Echo Chamber Intensity:** Ease of finding ideologically homogeneous communities
- **Accelerated Timeline:** Traditional radicalization takes years; digital can occur in months or weeks

Research documents clear migration patterns from Intellectual Dark Web to Alt-Lite to Alt-Right channels. Users who commented on Alt-Right channels had 4.1x probability of having commented on IDW channels. 18.5% of users progressed through pipeline stages.

Distinctive Features of Digital Radicalization

- **Accessibility:** 24/7 access to extremist content without geographic constraints

SECTION V

Protective Factors and De-Radicalization

Understanding what prevents radicalization is as important as understanding what causes it.

- **Emotional regulation:** Impulse control, constructive anger processing, resilience to disappointment
- **Strong pro-social identity:** Secure family attachment, positive cultural/religious identity, non-extremist activities

Research shows Muslims with strong cultural identity and personal self-esteem were significantly less vulnerable to extremist appeals ($\beta = -.42$, $p < .001$, $n=198$).

Individual Protective Factors

- **Cognitive complexity:** Critical thinking skills, tolerance for ambiguity, perspective-taking ability
- **De-radicalization:** Cognitive transformation away from extremist ideology
- **Disengagement:** Behavioral change—ceasing extremist activities without necessarily abandoning beliefs

Disengagement is more achievable short-term goal; ideological change takes years.

Pathways Out:

Push Factors (61%): Disillusionment with group/ideology, burnout, internal conflicts, external opportunities

Pull Factors (53%): Family obligations, new relationships, education and career opportunities, alternative identity

Meta-analysis of European de-radicalization programs shows 62% disengagement rate at 3-year follow-up, 34% ideological de-radicalization, 11% recidivism rate (compared to 31% for general criminal offenders), and \$3.20 return per dollar spent in reduced incarceration and harm prevention.

De-Radicalization Pathways

Conceptual Distinction:

Key Insights from Scientific Literature:

- Radicalization is a process, not an event—typically unfolding over months or years
- Social networks matter more than ideology—relationships often precede belief adoption
- Online environments accelerate radicalization—compressing timelines and intensifying exposure
- Most radicalized individuals do not commit violence—distinguishing belief from action is critical
- Multiple factors must align—need, narrative, and network (3N model)

- De-radicalization is possible—disengagement occurs through push and pull factors
- Prevention is more effective than intervention—protective factors and early off-ramps

Understanding these mechanisms is essential not only for counterterrorism but for addressing the broader phenomenon of recruitment into coordinated harmful operations, including disinformation campaigns, harassment networks, and other "information mercenary" services.

The field continues to evolve, with digital radicalization presenting new challenges requiring innovative research methodologies and interdisciplinary collaboration.

CONCLUSION

Key Insights & Future Directions

The radicalization chain represents a complex, multi-factorial process influenced by individual psychology, social dynamics, and environmental contexts. No single pathway explains all cases, and most individuals exposed to extremist content do not radicalize.

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