Routledge Handbook of Deradicalisation and Disengagement

Stig Jarle Hansen, Stian Lid

Terminology and definitions

Publication details
Daniel Koehler
Published online on: 03 Mar 2020

How to cite: Daniel Koehler. 03 Mar 2020, Terminology and definitions from: Routledge Handbook of Deradicalisation and Disengagement Routledge
Accessed on: 18 Oct 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
‘Deradicalization’ has increasingly become a buzzword in counter-terrorism circles around the world in recent years. Even though research into individual exit processes from violent extremist groups dates back at least to the late 1980s (Aho, 1988), rehabilitation programs for civil war combatants (disarmament, demobilization, reintegration – DDR) have been conducted since 1989 (Muggah, 2005, p. 244) and whole terror groups have disavowed violent means on many occasions in the past (e.g. Ashour, 2009; El-Said, 2012; Ferguson, 2010), the relatively young term ‘deradicalization’ began to emerge and enter the international discourse mainly through Middle Eastern countries’ attempts to use theological debates on terrorist prisoners, aiming to convince them to abandon militant jihadist ideology as a part of the ‘Global War on Terror’ initiated by the United States of America after the September 11 attacks. While state-run programs like those in Yemen (Johnsen, 2006) and Saudi Arabia (Boucek, 2007; El-Said & Barrett, 2012) starting just a few years after 9/11 were pivotal to spread the deradicalization concept into the general public (e.g. Time magazine: Ripley, 2008) and to spark further academic interest (e.g. Bjørgo & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009b; Mullins, 2010; Noricks, 2009), some programs (governmental and non-governmental) in Europe had already been working extensively on diverting right-wing extremists away from violence and terrorism since the mid-1990s (Bjørgo, 1997; Bjørgo & Carlsson, 2005). Very early, though, leading experts have found the ‘lack of conceptual clarity in the emerging discourse on deradicalization striking’ (Bjørgo & Horgan, 2009, p. 3). It seemed that the term was being applied to a wide array of policies and tools with ‘virtually no conceptual development in the area’ (Horgan, 2009b, p. 17). With the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and the emergence of terrorist semi-states like the so-called ‘caliphate’ of the terror organization Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Honig & Yahel, 2017) and the global increase in ‘foreign fighter’ travel movements to unprecedented levels (Hegghammer, 2013), governments around the world have been under pressure to develop and implement various different responses to the perceived threat of returned and radicalized combatants (e.g. Vidino, 2014). In 2014, the United Nations Security Council released Resolution 2178, urging all member states to establish effective rehabilitation measures for returning fighters from Syria and Iraq (UNSC, 2014). Similarly, the revised European Union Counter Terrorism Strategy places strong importance on ‘disengagement and exit strategies’ (EU, 2014, p. 11). Hence, it is fair to say that programs and strategies that could roughly be...
described as ‘deradicalization’ measures have gained global significance in the fight against terrorism, recruitment into violent extremism and violent radicalization. However, terminology remains unclear and potentially inhibits development in the field, as Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan (2014, p. 647) found ‘that existing research remains devoid of conceptual clarity’ with synonymous and inconsistent use of different terms.

Of course, deradicalization as a concept is by etymology tied to its opposite: ‘radicalization’, an equally contested and controversial term. However, research into radicalization processes and pathways leading to violent extremism, terrorism and violence has received much more academic and public attention than deradicalization, with an extensive and almost unmanageably large body of publications and studies from various different disciplines. Nevertheless, conceptual clarity and a more or less shared understanding of basic terms are absolutely indispensable for any academic or practical development and advancement in a field with so many expectations placed upon it, especially since ‘much of our understanding of the causal processes of disengagement from terrorism remains theoretical or speculative and under-researched’ (Gill, Bouhana, & Morrison, 2015, p. 245).

This chapter aims to give an overview of the most important terms, concepts and frictions within the different argumentations and schools of thought. It points out where the radicalization and deradicalization discourse might have disconnected from the necessities of so called ‘front-line practitioners’ who are tasked with achieving success in working with individuals with different violent extremist and terrorist backgrounds, as well as with those vulnerable and under high risk of entering extremist movements. Funding and establishment of such programs in the field have gained exponential traction regardless of the conceptual unclarity among academics and policy makers. This holds the danger of uninformed or conceptually weak programs being implemented in practice, working with high-risk individuals. Hence, this chapter will also suggest ways to reconsolidate the current academic discourse with the practical field regarding key terms and concepts.

**Radicalization**

Before turning to a discussion of the term deradicalization, it is necessary to shed some light on the process it claims to counter or reverse: ‘radicalization’. Having entered the mainstream political, media and academic discourse after the London terror attacks of July 7, 2005 (Sedgwick, 2010), the term is widely understood to describe a ‘process by which an individual adopts an extremist ideology’ (Braddock, 2014, p. 62). Before the term entered the discourse, academics and policy makers usually referred to ‘root causes’ of terrorism (Neumann, 2008, p. 4). The European Commission sees ‘radicalization’ as a process of ‘embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism’ (Reinares et al., 2008, p. 5). Similarly focusing on the aspect of violence, Bosi, Demetriou and Malthaner (2014a, p. 2) understand this individual change as ‘a process forming through strategy, structure, and conjuncture, and involving the adoption and sustained use of violent means to achieve articulated political goals’. Whether or not the use of violence is actually a key aspect of radicalization remains contested and led to the distinction between violent and non-violent radicalization (Bartlett & Miller, 2012). Non-violent radicalization is seen as ‘the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology’ by Horgan and Braddock (2010, p. 152). This means that: ‘radicalization may not necessarily lead to violence, but is one of several risk factors required for this’ (ibid.). Violent radicalization on the other hand is defined by the same scholars as:
the social and psychological process of increased and focused radicalization through involvement with a violent non-state movement. Violent radicalization encompasses the phases of a) becoming involved with a terrorist group and b) remaining involved and engaging in terrorist activity; it involves a process of pre-involvement searching for the opportunity to engage in violence and the exploration of competing alternatives; the individual must have both the opportunity for engagement as well as the capacity to make a decision about that engagement (ibid.)

or, in the words of Bartlett and Miller, violent radicalization means simply the ‘radicalization that leads to violence’ and non-violent radicalization ‘the process by which individuals come to hold radical views in relation to the status quo but do not undertake, aid, or abet terrorist activity’ (Bartlett & Miller, 2012, p. 2 [italics in original]).

Alternatively, some scholars have argued to speak of ‘cognitive’ (focusing on extremist beliefs) and ‘behavioral’ radicalization (focusing on extremist actions) (Neumann, 2013). This dichotomy between psychological and physical sides of the process will be mirrored in the concept of deradicalization as well. However, violent and non-violent radicalization have both received considerably more academic attention in recent decades compared with deradicalization, and the abundant body of literature focusing on radicalization from various different fields has resulted in numerous metastudies attempting to summarize the state of the art (e.g. Borum, 2011a, 2011b; Christmann, 2012; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Horgan, 2008; Reinares et al., 2008). Nevertheless, the term ‘radicalization’ itself remains a source of confusion and no widespread consensus exists about what it actually means and which components are necessary to define it (Pisoiu, 2011, p. 10; Sedgwick, 2010). Mainly due to the use of the term in at least three different contexts with three different agendas (the ‘security’, ‘integration’ and ‘foreign policy’ contexts; see Sedgwick, 2010, p. 479), clear-cut definitions are scarce and vary greatly in content and scope. While the ‘security’ agenda focuses on radicalization as a security threat, the integration agenda, according to Sedgwick, is mainly concerned with political polarization about immigration politics. Lastly, the ‘foreign policy’ agenda uses the concepts of ‘radical’ and ‘radicalization’ as labels to justify certain policies by state actors, for example supressing national opposition, aligned to international discourses, e.g. the ‘war on terror’. In consequence, Sedgwick suggests abandoning the idea of being ‘radical’ and ‘radicalization’ as absolute concepts and recognizing their relative and dynamic nature.

One way to define the core of radicalization beyond the use of violence is, for example, the individual’s motive to fundamentally alter the surrounding environment. In this regard, Moskalenko and McCauley (2009) have suggested introducing the concept of ‘activism’ as the legal counterpart to illegal ‘radicalism’. Echoing this notion, Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010, p. 798) defines ‘radicalization’ as ‘a growing readiness to pursue and support far-reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose a direct threat to, the existing order’. Pointing to the fact that ‘radicalization’ is, in fact, a label used to interpret a certain behavior by outsiders, De Vito (2014, p. 72) sees ‘radicalization’ as ‘a shift in the contents and/or forms of contention that, in relation to previous contents and/or forms of contention, is perceived as an escalation by (some) historical agents and/or by external observers’. As noted by Pisoiu (2011, p. 12), most definitions actually describe a result, rather than the process or mechanism of radicalization as such. Suggesting that one should understand ‘radicalism’ as a ‘political ideology with the objective of inducing sweeping change based on fundamental or “root”
principles’ (Pisoiu, 2011, p. 23) means that ‘radicalization’ implies a twofold process: on the one hand a growing desire for (fundamental) change, and on the other an increasing importance of ‘root’ (referring to the Latin word radix for ‘root’ or ‘base’) principles.

Furthermore, one can identify roughly four schools within research looking at processes of ‘radicalization’: the sociological, social movement, empirical (for the first three, see Dalggaard-Nielsen, 2010) and psychological schools. The ‘sociological’ school (e.g. Kepel, 2004; Kepel & Milelli, 2008; Khosrokhavar, 2005, 2006; Roy, 2004) sees the main reason for radicalization lying with the individual, who reclaims a lost identity in an environment perceived as hostile (Dalggaard-Nielsen, 2010). The ‘social movement’ (and ‘framing’) theorists claim, however, that radicalization occurs due to networks, group dynamics, peer pressure and a constructed reality (e.g. Sageman, 2004, 2007a, 2007b; Wiktorowicz, 2004). Within the literature on social movements, another group of scholars have developed an approach labelled ‘contentious politics’ (Bosi, Demetriou, & Malthaner, 2014b; Della Porta, 2013; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Tarrow, 1998), looking at the relational aspects of violence and between social movements in conflict with each other. Research within this framework has shown that radicalization leading to violence is the result of mutual processes involving ‘competition between movement activists and opponents, especially in the form of escalating policing but also of competitive escalation within the social movement sector, as well as within social movement families’ (Della Porta, 2013, p. 94). Indeed, once thoroughly scrutinized, it becomes clear that radicalism (including radicalization) does not “come upon” the regular political institutions, but emerges within and around them’ (Pisoiu, 2011, p. 24) and therefore the exchange between the different groups, movements, individuals and societies becomes essential to understand the phenomenon. One approach to theoretically conceptualize that exchange was suggested by Koehler (2015), which essentially sees a radical social movement connected to its surrounding mainstream ideology through infrastructure (e.g. events, rituals, clothing, subcultural products) and its own ideology. Radical social movements need to negotiate a middle ground between attacking and destroying a negative, as well as winning over a positive, target society. Caught in this competition over ideological efficacy, the social space between these movements with their own goals and collective identities and the target societies provides the fertile ground for individual and collective radicalization in Koehler’s model.

The ‘empiricists’, in contrast, try to find individual-level motivations and socio-economic profiles and draw the theories inductively (Nesser, 2004; Slootman & Tillie, 2006). One outcome of this school is the classification of different types of members within extremist groups with different radicalization processes, motives and backdrops – e.g. the ‘leader’, the ‘protégé’, the ‘misfit’ and the ‘drifter’ (Nesser, 2004).

The fourth school can be called ‘psychological’, with one main author being John Horgan (Horgan, 2005, 2008, 2017). Horgan points to the fact that no ‘terrorist’ profile has been found and most studies do not look into the socio-psychological dynamics between ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Horgan (2008, pp. 6–7) states that emotional vulnerability, dissatisfaction with current political activity, identification with victims, belief that the use of violence is not immoral, a sense of reward and social ties in the radical group, among others, are very important factors for understanding how these dynamics lead to the use of violence.

In addition to these studies focusing on individual pathways into extremism and terrorism, other scholars have attempted to identify radicalization models and the necessary steps or phases an individual has to go through on the path to violent extremism. To name only a few and most widely cited, the first major radicalization model theory was published in 2007 by the New York Police Department Intelligence Division (Silber & Bhatt, 2007).

Another widely recognized model was designed by Marc Sageman (2004, 2007a, 2007b), who also identified a four-step process. His phases, however, do not need to follow each other in one sequence, but rather constantly appear during an individual radicalization process: moral outrage; specific interpretation or worldview; contextualization with personal experiences; and mobilization through interactive networks.

Inspired by Sageman’s studies, Michael Taarnby (2005) developed his own radicalization model based on an in-depth analysis of the 9/11 cell from Hamburg incorporating eight stages: individual alienation and marginalization; a spiritual quest; a process of radicalization; meeting and associating with like-minded people; gradual seclusion and cell formation; acceptance of violence as legitimate political means; connection with a gatekeeper in the know; and going operational.

As a last example of the many different process models looking at violent radicalization, Moghaddam’s (2005) famous ‘staircase’ model includes three individual levels (dispositional factors), one organizational level (situation) and one environmental level (socio-economic). Moghaddam uses the metaphor of a staircase in a house where everyone lives on the ground floor. However, a small group of people are driven by a psychological process to gradually move up the stairs, during which the group is constantly reduced. If a person reaches the top, terrorist attacks become almost inevitable, as together with the upward movement the number of individual decisions are constantly narrowed down.

All these process models point to the fact that individual radicalization pathways are gradual processes spanning over a certain time span and involving different cognitive and behavioral steps. One benefit of identifying these steps and pathways would be to eventually identify persons at risk of or already engaged in radicalization, in order to initiate an adequate intervention. This aim implies that radicalization processes are visible or noticeable in the first place, an aspect increasingly seen in doubt as part of the ‘lone wolf’ radicalization theory (e.g. Bakker & de Graaf, 2010; Feldman, 2013; Spaaij, 2010, 2011). There is, however, strong indication that even ‘lone wolf’ radicalization processes rarely, if ever, happen completely unnoticed by the affective environment or associate gatekeepers (Gill, Horgan, & Deckert, 2014). This opens the possibility to provide specialized support for communities and families to recognize potential radicalization processes and intervene.

Those definitions and process models presented above have so far described what a violent radicalization process is and what it may look like in terms of individual steps towards violence. Most theories and especially the process models identifying phases and steps within the radicalization processes remain more or less deterministic in their attempts to identify biographical factors or root causes of radicalization. Empirically, the search for a terrorist profile has thoroughly failed:

Neither psychological nor other research has revealed qualities unique to those who become involved in terrorism, or the existence of singular pathways into (and out of) terrorism. Though terrorist profiles exist in a broad sense, no meaningful (i.e., having predictive validity) psychological profile has been found either within or across groups. If anything, the composition of terrorist groups is remarkable for its diversity.

(Horgan, 2017, p. 200)
Hence, there is a need for concepts of radicalization that focus more on the psychological mechanisms behind the process as such, rather than individual factors and root causes.

It was suggested by Koehler (2016, pp. 65–94) to understand radicalization as a process of individual depluralization of political concepts and values (e.g. justice, freedom, honour, violence, democracy) on the one hand and an increase in ideological urgency to act against a framed problem on the other. With a higher degree of individual internalization of the notion that no other alternative interpretations of the (individually prioritized) political concepts and values exist (or are relevant), one can show (e.g. in syntax, language and behavior) the progression of the radicalization process. This in turn creates a value conflict with the surrounding mainstream value system, which was seen by Schwartz (2017) to be one of the main driving factors of political alienation, or more precisely, the process of disconnection from the mainstream value system with the potential for ending in violent behavior. This internalization of ideologically framed political concepts and problems can be emotional and/or intellectual, which in itself is not dangerous to any society. The important link here is the fusion (and combination) with a certain type of ideology that inherently denies individual freedom (or equal rights) to anyone who is not part of the radical person’s in-group and thus the degree of ideological incompatibility with the mainstream political culture.

It is clear that the term ‘ideology’ plays a major role in understanding radicalization. A major function of every ideology is to ‘cement the word–concept relationship’ and to ‘attach a single meaning to a political term’ (Freeden, 1994, p. 156). Thus, every ideology strives to ‘decontest’ the range of meanings that can possibly be attached to central political concepts. ‘Decontestation’ or ‘depluralization’ is, in fact, the core dynamic of radicalization, which at the beginning postulates and defines specific religious or political problems (e.g. the suffering of Muslims in Syria, unemployment of members of the ‘Aryan’ race) and contextualizes these with the recruit’s individual biographical experiences and background in order to connect global or abstract issues with micro-social events (e.g. conflicts in the family, discrimination). Through this mechanism, other individual or social problems and issues are gradually pushed aside or integrated into the main problem set defined by the ideology. Typically fostered and driven through the tactical use of propaganda material, connection with charismatic leaders and mentors and the assignment of group-specific tasks, the individual is integrated into a ‘contrast society’ connecting the radical social movement with the mainstream environment (Koehler, 2015), in which the basic ideological tenets are intertwined with individual values, political concepts and beliefs.

During the process of depluralization, these values and concepts are gradually rewritten, restructured and redefined. This alone is nothing extraordinary, as every ideology typically functions in that way. Violent radical ideologies, however, constantly erase and negate alternative or competing definitions of the ideology’s core values and concepts and try to establish a monopoly in this regard. At the same time, the propaganda and group dynamics constantly increase the urgency and importance of the core problems stated through the movement and ideology. On the one hand, this is an automatic result of any depluralization process by simply erasing or devaluing other problems. On the other hand, radical social movements deliberately overstate the importance of their core issues in order to trigger activism and commitment more effectively. Consequently, a psychological tension is built up within the recruit for which the movement offers a solution: the praised future vision. At the end of the process, the recruit only recognizes one problem subsuming every other or simply being much more important than all other issues, only one viable solution and one perfect vision for the future. Simultaneously, the individual’s understanding of core political concepts and values has dramatically changed according to this new problem–solution–vision triad.
A maximally radicalized person in this sense does not recognize an alternative concept, for example, of ‘justice’, ‘freedom’ or ‘honour’, and even reacts aggressively towards different viewpoints. As the problematic aspect of ‘violent radical ideologies’ lies within the inherent inequality between human beings, the decreasing number of alternative concepts, values, problems and solutions in combination with an increasing urgency of the main problem forces each person inevitably (in case the process is not interrupted) to eventually cross the individual point at which the use of violence is the only option to resolve the tension. Non-violent solutions have been declared ineffective or useless and are not adequate to the perceived importance of the problem anymore. Slowly (or sometimes rather quickly) reaching that critical point is the ‘time bomb effect’ – a mechanism underlying every form of radicalization. If these processes do not lead to violence, the individual’s (or group’s) ideology is not in direct, or only modest, contrast with the mainstream political culture and surrounding ideology. It is therefore of great importance to what degree the surrounding environment perceives the individual or group as a direct threat or political competitor and reacts accordingly, whether repressive or not – a course of action which fosters depluralization processes and the use of violence, as has been reflected in the social movement literature and especially the contentious politics approach to radicalization, which includes the relational field and contextualization of violence to explain the individual or collective move towards violence (Bosi, Demetriou, & Malthaner, 2014b).

**Deradicalization**

As noted above, the term ‘deradicalization’ has been widely used with conceptual unclarity and been used synonymously and inconsistently with other terms (Altier et al., 2014). Horgan and Taylor (2011, p. 175), for example, listed ‘rehabilitation’, ‘reform’, ‘counseling’, ‘reconciliation’, ‘amnesty’, ‘demobilization’, ‘disbandment’, ‘dialogue’ and ‘deprogramming’ as concepts competing and sometimes exchangeable with deradicalization. In addition, Koehler (2016) named ‘reintegration’, ‘re-education’, ‘desistance’ (primary, secondary and tertiary), ‘disaffiliation’ and ‘debiasing’. All these terms roughly describe a similar process of turning from a position of perceived deviance or conflict with the surrounding environment towards moderation and equilibrium. This process can take numerous different forms, for example, voluntary or involuntary; permanent or temporary; individual or collective; and psychological or physical (Koehler, 2016, p. 14).

It is obvious that all these concepts and terms describe a psychological and physical process essentially measured by individuals’ or groups’ degree of accordance, respectively conflict, with the legal, ideological or moral views of the surrounding majority (or mainstream) environment. Hence, deradicalization and its competing concepts have to be understood as terms marking a specific kind of societal negotiation between a community and perceived deviants aiming at conflict reduction. Most of these concepts and terms (including deradicalization) imply that the source for the conflict lies with the ‘deviant’ other, who must be somehow aligned with the position of the mainstream majority, assuming that an increased alignment automatically reduces conflict. Deradicalization, and most of these competing concepts, therefore have to navigate a precarious borderline between reducing plurality of opinions and convictions on the one hand, sometimes even crossing the threshold to infringe upon central core freedoms guaranteed in all Western democratic countries, and reducing sources of violent conflict based on extremist thought patterns, ideologies or group dynamics on the other. This inherent struggle with moral legitimacy of the deradicalization concept (i.e. the attempted change of a person’s or group’s political or religious opinion,
which are oftentimes not illegal), at least in Western countries, was described in detail by Koehler (2016, pp. 201–210) and has to be the background for the following conceptual and definitional remarks.

The inherent moral legitimacy conflict is one of the reasons that deradicalization’s most important competing concept is ‘disengagement’ and both are usually used in combination with each other. Looking at some definitions by leading academic experts, the main difference between deradicalization and disengagement is the focus on ideology, or more precisely the psychological side of exiting a violent extremist milieu. Horgan and Braddock (2010, p. 152), for example, define disengagement as:

the process whereby an individual experiences a change in role or function that is usually associated with a reduction of violent participation. It may not necessarily involve leaving the movement, but is most frequently associated with significant temporary or permanent role change. Additionally, while disengagement may stem from role change, that role change may be influenced by psychological factors such as disillusionment, burnout or the failure to reach the expectations that influenced initial involvement. This can lead to a member seeking out a different role within the movement

and deradicalization as:

the social and psychological process whereby an individual’s commitment to, and involvement in, violent radicalization is reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and engagement in violent activity. Deradicalization may also refer to any initiative that tries to achieve a reduction of risk of re-offending through addressing the specific and relevant disengagement issues.

(Horgan & Braddock, 2010, p. 153)

More specifically, Braddock (2014, p. 60) points out that deradicalization is a ‘psychological process through which an individual abandons his extremist ideology and is theoretically rendered a decreased threat for re-engaging in terrorism’.

Hence, at a first glance, the main difference between disengagement and deradicalization is if reduction of the ideological commitment (deradicalization) or physical role change and desistance from illegal behavior (disengagement) is the main focus of the process. However, it is more complex than that. Horgan (2009a, p. 19), for example, notes that, even if psychologically reducing commitment to a violent extremist group is the goal, deradicalization (i.e. reduction in ideological commitment) does not have to be part of the process and might not even be a likely outcome. Using the term ‘psychological disengagement’ as synonymous with ‘deradicalization’ (Horgan, Altier, Shortland, & Taylor, 2016, p. 11), he found that, in his large sample of interviews with former terrorists he collected between 2006 and 2008, ‘almost all could be described as disengaged, the vast majority of them could not be said to be “deradicalized”’ (2009a, p. 27). In this differentiation between disengagement and deradicalization, another term, ‘ideology’, again plays a significant role.

To complicate this even further, ideology and its role in entering, as well as leaving, extremist milieus has essentially divided the discourse specifically on deradicalization into a ‘broad’ and ‘narrow’ school (Clubb, 2015), with the first aiming to achieve rejection of ideological-based violence and the latter including various other ideological aspects as well. Furthermore, while it has
been argued that disengagement, i.e. the mere physical role change and desistance from crime, would be more feasible and realistic (e.g. Noricks, 2009), other scholars have pointed out that in order to reduce recidivism of extremist offenders, it is necessary to address ‘beliefs and attitudes that drive violent behavior’ (Braddock, 2014, p. 60). Not addressing these underlying beliefs and attitudes, as well as the individual psychological factors of attraction, might increase the chance of a failed exit process and the risk of re-radicalization (Koehler, 2016; Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez, & Boucek, 2010). However, beliefs, attitudes and factors of attraction might overlap with the milieu’s ideology, but they don’t have to be entirely equal. Other parts of the collective identity or oppositional culture within the extremist environment can also provide a pull factor. In that sense, ‘ideology’, as explained above in the section on ‘radicalization’, is better understood as a dynamic set of political values and ideals, which is constantly renegotiated between the individual and the collective, albeit to a differing degree of involvement from both sides.

It is important to note here that the term deradicalization has been used to describe both the process of exiting an extremist environment on the one side and the wider practical activity by programs or mentors on the other. Practitioners in the field tend not to distinguish between the role of ideology in the exit process when describing their activities, but rather see every form of assisted departure from an extremist milieu and reintegration into a non-extremist life as ‘deradicalization’. Bringing together the terminology of the wider deradicalization field at this point, the different forms of exiting can be defined according to the degree of ideological removal (from the weakest to the strongest): physical disengagement, psychological disengagement or deradicalization (narrow) and deradicalization (broad). These processes can overlap and an individual might go through all or only one of them in different order. For example, physical disengagement might lead to a narrow deradicalization, which might lead to a broad one in the long run (Clubb, 2017). It must also be recognized that these developments are not a one-way process but also include setbacks and reversals. Some aspects of the ideology or group might regain attractiveness, for example, in the form of another extremist ideology or group. This essentially means that ‘deradicalisation should not be considered a psychological return to some pre-radicalised state’ (Braddock, 2014, p. 62) but as a new development in itself.

Shifting the focus to deradicalization as a practical activity, another set of terms and concepts have entered the discourse. One common classification used in connection to deradicalization is the trifold prevention matrix from Caplan (1964), being rooted in clinical psychiatry and dubbed ‘Public Health Model’. ‘Primary’ prevention in this matrix aims to prevent a deviant behavior from occurring in a non-infected system. ‘Secondary’ prevention aims to avert its solidification, when it is already present and ‘tertiary’ prevention in consequence aims to prevent this element from recurring in the future. As intended by Caplan, every intervention in tertiary prevention essentially aims to prevent recidivism. This mechanism was echoed when deradicalization as practical activity was seen as programs reducing risk of terrorist recidivism (Horgan & Altier, 2012). In this context, academics and practitioners have seen deradicalization activities as tertiary prevention (e.g. Harris-Hogan, Barrelle, & Zammit, 2015).

Another classification concept from using a prevention-based terminology applied to deradicalization was introduced by Gordon Jr (1983), who, in contrast to Caplan, only looked at a state of non-infection. ‘Universal’ prevention in this concept aims to introduce wide, easy and cheap measures of preventative care, e.g. a healthier nutrition. ‘Selective’ prevention aims to introduce more differential methods targeting a group with a higher risk of infection, while ‘indexed’ prevention aims at those with a high risk. Objection to that framework was, for example, raised by Koehler (2016), who argued that preventing
Recidivism is just one necessary (and later) part of deradicalization, which must reduce individual physical and psychological commitment to the extremist group and ideology in the first place. In addition, using a classification scheme from clinical psychiatry might imply a pathological nature of radicalization and deradicalization, which can have a significant negative impact on practitioners’ self-understanding and the cognitive opening of the program participants.

Next to these classifications from mental health and disease control, attempts to counter violent radicalization processes have been commonly referred to as ‘countering violent extremism’ (CVE) programs (e.g. Cherney et al., 2017; Harris-Hogan et al., 2015). These are usually understood to be preventative in nature and to be ‘an approach intended to preclude individuals from engaging in, or materially supporting, ideologically motivated violence’ (Williams, 2017, p. 153). It would be more accurate, however, to see CVE as the umbrella category under which prevention-oriented initiatives (i.e. before a person radicalizes to a point of using violence) and intervention-oriented initiatives (i.e. deradicalization and disengagement of persons who are already radicalized to the point of using violence) are subsumed. The first is commonly referred to as ‘counter-radicalization’ or ‘preventing violent extremism’ (PVE) programs and the latter as deradicalization, rehabilitation or reintegration program.

Naturally, there is no clear distinction between prevention- or intervention-oriented methods and programs in practice as radicalization processes are not linear and dynamic as well. Hence, whether or not a person is not yet ‘radical enough’ for deradicalization is mostly impossible and even futile to answer, which is why most practitioners do not differentiate as clearly the different terms and concepts as the academic discourse might suggest. Case managers or mentors who are in touch with the client, participant or beneficiary have to decide on an individual case-by-case basis which tools and methods to choose. In reality, prevention- and intervention-oriented tools form a methods-blend aiming to achieve effects on all levels: preventing further radicalization; decreasing physical and psychological commitment to the radical milieu and thought pattern or ideology; preventing return to violence and extremism; increasing resilience to extremist ideologies or groups; and assisting to build a new self-sustained life and identity. Usually, reference points for mentors and case managers are the time spent in the extremist environment, position or rank in the group and quantity and severity of crimes committed in the name of the extremist ideology. The question of individual conviction or the degree of internalization of that extremist ideology is in many cases never fully answered but rather addressed through a methods mix, including a variety of different approaches (for an overview see: Koehler, 2016). Even though it is seen as a major necessity of high-quality deradicalization work to base the methods mix for individual counselling on a detailed account of the client’s risk factors and needs (Koehler, 2017b), tools for adequate risk assessment are contested (Sarma, 2017) and so are attempts to identify root causes or driving factors of a violent radicalization. Practitioners mostly assume some connection between identified biographical friction points or traumatic experiences, as well as somehow expressed factors of attraction (e.g. action and adventure seeking, quest for significance, search for loyalty, camaraderie and honour), which is embodied in the extremist group or ideology. As outlined by Koehler (2015), violent radical milieus are not monolithic, static and clearly separated groups but rather in constant exchange with their positive and negative target societies through infrastructure and ideology. As there are multiple ways in and out of these contrast societies (i.e. the mechanism of interaction between the radical group and mainstream environment), it is also possible to move within these milieus. Motivations for joining can, but do not have to, be connected to reasons for leaving. In consequence, as radicalization is a context
bound phenomenon ‘par excellence’ (Reinares et al., 2008, p. 7), so is deradicalization. Practitioners constantly have to adapt their methods and tools to the individual context of the client combined with the goal to achieve a maximum of disengagement or deradicalization possible.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the most important terms and definitions used by academics and practitioners in the deradicalization landscape, which not only includes various key concepts around leaving a violent extremist or terrorist milieu, but also how to understand the process of entering that environment. It is clear that both key terms (radicalization and deradicalization) are connected to a third key term: ideology. Experts from both academia and the practitioner field see a psychological and physical side of radicalization and deradicalization, which led to the introduction of additional terms (e.g. disengagement). In addition to the question of the importance of ideology during enter and exit processes, the role of violence is key to understanding the various rifts within the terminological discourse. As a natural marker of legal and illegal activism, the use of violence provides an easy way to assess if a person has crossed the line into the criminal space or left it in case of abstaining from violence. Without a doubt, however, individuals undergo a psychological process of change before they reach that threshold and after moving back. Arguably, that process of change is key for prevention- or rehabilitation-oriented external support. As entering and exiting violent extremism and terrorism follow highly individual and context-specific pathways, in which political concepts and ideas (ideology) intertwine with biographical and situational factors, these change processes hardly follow a linear development and can be impacted (positively or negatively) by significant others in the affective environment.

While academics have stressed the necessity for clear-cut definitions and concepts (e.g. to differentiate between deradicalization and disengagement), practitioners have pointed out the need for flexibility in choosing approaches and methods for each individual case, which also means being able to shift between deradicalization and disengagement goals and tools for an individual client. One of the biggest challenges, therefore, is to reconnect the academic discourse around terms and concepts of deradicalization to practitioners’ needs and understanding of the day-to-day work with their clients.

One possible way to achieve this might be to focus on quality standards in deradicalization work, which is essential to improve evaluability, as well as identification and transfer of good practices by academics on the one hand and more flexibility on the practitioners’ side on the other. Because one part of quality standards in deradicalization is conceptual clarity (Koehler, 2017a, 2017b), in order to choose adequate methods and tools but also to understand and recognize when to alter the approach, there is also the requirement for practitioners to be sufficiently equipped for the complex and individual nature of radicalization and deradicalization. Hence, quality standards could be the connecting bridge between the academic and practitioner discourse on terms and definitions.

References


Terminology and definitions


Terminology and definitions

