EXPLORING THE VIABILITY OF PHASE-BASED MODELS IN (DE)RADICALIZATION

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Particularly since the tragedy of 9/11, there has been increased research attention on radicalization and terrorism, defined as “politically motivated violence, perpetrated by individuals, groups, or state-sponsored agents, intended to instill feelings of terror and helplessness in a population in order to influence decision making and to change behavior” (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 161). In line with Kurt Lewin’s (1951) dictum that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory” (p. 169), much of this research has involved theory development. Theoretical models of radicalization must explain how and why people radicalize in such a way that they are motivated to kill others, and sometimes themselves, apparently for their purported ideals. An important assumption of such models is that radicalization towards terrorism tends to take place through a gradual process, which is often divided into distinctive phases describing how individuals (and/or groups) become increasingly engaged with extreme ideologies and groups. An influential metaphor that is used to describe these successive phases is that of the staircase. In The Staircase to Terrorism (Moghaddam, 2005, 2009), radicalization is envisioned as a narrowing staircase connecting five floors that are each characterized by specific psychological processes. Other such “phase models” differ in regard to the emphasis they place on specific (psychological) aspects or processes, but they are similar in their view of radicalization as a process involving different successive phases leading to increased commitment to extremist ideologies and the use of violence. In each of these phases certain psychological processes play a role in shaping this commitment.

To date, much less attention has been paid to similar processes in the opposite direction —that is, different phases and corresponding factors that could explain deradicalization and disengagement from extremist groups (e.g., Feddes, 2015; Horgan, 2008a). The field is expanding, however (e.g., Koehler, 2017). For example, Moghaddam (2009) used his own staircase model to terrorism to discuss options for deradicalization.

One could argue that any phase model that describes the path towards radicalization or engagement can also be used to explain the path leading away from radicalization or engagement. However, one should be careful not to simply regard the processes of disengagement and deradicalization as mirror images of engagement and radicalization (e.g., Bjørø, 2011; Moghaddam, 2009). Still, it may be worthwhile considering which specific psychological
factors that have been identified to contribute to radicalization in each different phase could also in some way be involved and coopted to reverse this process.

The primary goal of this chapter is to explore the extent to which phase-based models can be used to accurately describe the process of deradicalization. In addition, we will examine how this provides clues about which psychological processes could be targeted through specific interventions in different phases of the deradicalization process. To recognize the necessity for such knowledge, one can point to the phenomenon of foreign fighters participating in the war in Syria, and more specifically their (imminent) return to their Western countries of origin (e.g., Byman, 2015). It is valid to assume that these returnees remain in some key respects radicalized. Therefore, it is imperative that we make more rapid progress in understanding deradicalization processes. Phase-based models, however, may not only prove their worth in these cases of “advanced radicalization,” but are also helpful in determining which psychological factors are at play at earlier stages of radicalization. In other words, they enable a preventative approach that aims to halt the emergence of new home-grown terrorists and foreign fighters (see also Horgan, 2008b, on phase-specific counter-terrorism initiatives).

This chapter is structured as follows. First, we briefly describe some of the existing phase models that focus on movement to terrorism and discuss the main points of criticism levied against this type of model. Second, we present an overarching phase model of (de)radicalization which covers the most important aspects of the abovementioned existing theories, and aims to overcome some of the limitations. Within this model, we distinguish between different (kinds of) concrete external trigger factors that could explain why individuals move from one phase to the next, different underlying psychological needs, and specific psychological aspects of resilience which play a role in various phases of the process. In the concluding paragraphs, we briefly explore some of the main implications of our phase model for theory and practice as well as some ideas for future scientific research.

Phase models to and from terrorism

Most existing social psychological models of radicalization distinguish between several phases (see King & Taylor, 2011, for a review). For example, Moghaddam (2005, 2009) uses the metaphor of a staircase in a building to explain how a very small number of people (relative to the total size of a population) radicalize from the ground floor to the top (fifth) floor of the building where they commit a terrorist act. On each floor of this staircase certain psychological processes can influence the decision to either climb up or remain at the same level. This decision depends on people’s perceptions of the doors and spaces that are open to them on each of the floors. Importantly, the staircase is narrowing: the higher up one climbs, the smaller the number of individuals on each floor. Thus, only very few people actually reach the top floor of the building. From the nine different specializations engaged in terrorism (Moghaddam, 2007), only one type reaches the “top” floor. These individuals are radicalized to such an extent that they are willing and able to commit terrorist attacks, sometimes killing themselves as well as others.

Similar phase models have, for example, been outlined by Borum (2003), Wiktorowicz (2004), McCauley and Moskalenko (2008), Sageman (2008) and Horgan (2008a, 2008b). These models all envisage radicalization as a gradual process involving discrete successive phases, but they differ in their distinctions between phases and their emphasis on specific psychological processes that characterize these phases. Moreover, although Horgan
(2008a) does include disengagement from terrorism as a distinct phase in his model, most phase models ignore processes of disengagement and deradicalization.

Such phase models can be criticized on several aspects. First, as King and Taylor (2011) point out, many phase models assume that relative deprivation plays an important role at the initial stages of radicalization. However, one could also envision phase-based models that place identity-related issues, needs related to meaning seeking, or a need for adventure more centrally (see Feddes, Nickolson, & Doosje, 2015, for a review). Furthermore, it may be that the process of radicalization is more dynamic in that different needs are important at different phases for different people. For example, one person may join an extremist group because of identity-related needs (safety, friendship), while in later phases the need to counter injustice may play a more important role for this individual. For another person, the need for justice may be particularly important at an earlier stage, while identity-related needs become stronger over time when he or she forms stronger bonds in the group membership phase or before committing violent acts.

A second criticism on phase models is that they assume that radicalization is a linear process, while it may also just emerge as a combination of different factors (see also Lygre, Eid, Larsson, & Ranstorp, 2011; Veldhuis & Staun, 2009). However, not all phase models presume linearity. For example, Sageman (2008) describes radicalization among Muslims as an emergent non-linear process consisting of a sense of moral outrage about perceived injustices (e.g., the war in Iraq), a specific interpretation of the world (the “Western war against Islam”), resonance with personal experiences (e.g., unemployment, discrimination), and mobilization through networks (via face-to-face peer groups and online forums). These factors should, according to him, not be regarded as part of different consecutive stages, but they are simply important elements in the process towards radicalization. Similarly, viewing radicalization as a non-linear process, radicalization and deradicalization can repeatedly alternate and merge or flow into one another in different phases of the process(es) (i.e., Sageman, 2008). An example of this is the phenomenon that some extremists switch sides by starting initiatives to counter radicalization themselves, for example by working with governments they previously opposed (Schmid, 2014).

A third point of criticism on phase models is that these models do not explain why or under what circumstances a person moves from one phase to the next. The models somehow assume that individuals move up the radicalization phases without going into what causes an individual to become vulnerable to radicalization, to join a group, or to become prepared to commit a violent act. This is connected to a fourth weakness of traditional phase-based models, namely that they are overly broad. That is, each phase is characterized by very broad and unspecific indicative factors (e.g., a “changed appearance”) that in themselves may not signal violent radicalization or even radicalism at all (Veldhuis & Staun, 2009). When such broad factors are used to identify people who are radicalizing, mistakes are easily made and this may result in the stigmatization of people from certain (vulnerable) groups, potentially even creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A final point of critique on existing phase models of radicalization is that they use vulnerability of individuals to radicalize as a starting point. However, in order to understand deradicalization it is critical to also focus on what determines whether a person is resilient to radicalization, or resilient to outside attempts to deradicalize (see also Mann, Doosje, & Kruglanski, 2018).

Phase models, we argue, provide a valuable starting point to understand deradicalization. However, the limitations of these models should be acknowledged and addressed. In this chapter, we take these limitations into account by providing a more nuanced approach.
towards phase-based models and integrate this with recent insights on trigger factors, underlying psychological needs, and aspects of resilience against (de)radicalization. In an attempt to extend existing phase models to the process of deradicalization, we take a general phase model that summarizes previous work (Doosje et al., 2016) as a starting point and will discuss this in terms of deradicalization.

**A general phase model of deradicalization**

Building on previous models, Doosje et al. (2016) distinguish three subsequent phases in the process of radicalization, which also apply to the process of deradicalization when reversed. The basic elements of this model (Figure 4.1) are: (1) a vulnerability phase, in which a person is more or less sensitive to a radical ideology; (2) a group membership phase, in which the individual is a member of a radical group; and (3) an action phase, in which the individual is ready to act in line with the group’s ideals and ideology, even by means of violence. We will first broadly describe these three phases, and then discuss the trigger factors, psychological needs, and individual resilience which are involved in the movement of an individual from one phase to the other—in either direction—in more detail.

![Figure 4.1](image-url)
Phase 1: the vulnerability phase

There are many people who might be relatively (or potentially) sensitive to radicalization because they are confronted with certain structural conditions, which are often also called root factors. Such root factors range from one’s socio-economic position (and corresponding feelings of relative deprivation), uncertainty about one’s place (or “integration”) in society, or frustrations about world affairs—such as the wars in the Middle East (i.e., Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009). For example, Moghaddam’s (2005) staircase model emphasizes the millions of people in this phase who experience frustration and shame or humiliation as a result of perceived unfair treatment and personal or fraternal relative deprivation.

Such factors may constitute the “background music” to radicalization, but we cannot argue that all those people affected are actually involved in a radicalization process. In other words, by themselves these structural root causes are not sufficient when explaining or predicting terrorism, but have to be complemented with other factors, on the individual and group level (Forest, 2005; Newman, 2006; Schuurman, Bakker, & Eijkman, 2018). It is often only when a specific context or event renders their situation increasingly precarious or hopeless that they might experience a “cognitive opening” (Wiktorowicz, 2004), be propelled on a “quest for significance” (Kruglanski et al., 2013), or embark on a search for somewhere to belong (Buijs, Demant, & Hamdy, 2006; Winter, 2015). In other words, in those cases individuals are not only (potentially) sensitive but also vulnerable, and actively looking for solace or a remedy to their situation.

Phase 2: the group membership phase

A radical group might very well be a remedy to one’s situation, and provide solace and belonging. In this phase an individual becomes a member of such a group, be it directly physical or first virtual and later physical. Central to this phase is increasing mutual commitment between the group and the new member. Increased commitment to the morality of the terrorist organization can grow through the development of a parallel life that is secret and isolated, and in which strong and absolute affiliation with other members and the group leader is the norm. In line with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) people are generally motivated to view the ingroup as superior to outgroups, thus showing ingroup favoritism. In particular under conditions of perceived group threat, they also regard outgroups as inferior to the ingroup, engaging in outgroup derogation. This mechanism plays an important role in radical groups. The individual adheres to the norms and values of the group more and more strongly, starts to devalue outgroups, and burn bridges with original social circles. This leads to the development of a strong “us-versus-them” categorization of the world and the terrorist group gains in perceived legitimacy; it is considered a justified means to an idealized end. Thus, in this context, terrorism increasingly becomes a justified strategy. The so-called “slippery slope” mechanism (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008) is also important in this context. This refers to a mechanism of increasing self-radicalization via justification of past behavior by the adoption of new (radical) beliefs and values. This is comparable to what happened to participants who administered increasingly intense shocks to their (alleged) victims in Milgram’s famous experiments (Milgram, 1974; and see; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008).

Phase 3: the action phase

In this phase the individual is ready to act in accordance with the group’s ideals, for example, by planning or executing an attack (Doosje et al., 2016). Moghaddam (2005)
argues that, at this stage, individuals are selected and trained to side-step the inhibitory mechanisms that could hold them back from wounding or killing others and themselves. This happens through categorization of civilians as the enemy outgroup and dehumanizing them, and through a process of social distancing by (over)emphasizing differences between ingroup and outgroup. Those who are selected to commit terrorist acts are being prepared and equipped.

These three phases in principle are broad enough to describe deradicalization as well, since this process is often described as comprised of intermediate (or partial) steps away from violent extremism-inspired action. The distinction between disengagement (i.e., the cessation of terrorist behavior) and deradicalization (i.e., the elimination of one’s belief in a violent, extremist ideology) is especially relevant here (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014). In our current model, the former constitutes only a partial step towards full deradicalization, and—depending on the definition of terrorist behavior—could entail a move towards either the group membership or vulnerability phase. Deradicalization in its common sense, however, is also not unambiguous here, since leaving an ideology behind could still mean that the individual in question is vulnerable or potentially sensitive to renewed radicalization. By making these specific distinctions between those phases, the model thus provides clarity in discussions about such concepts. From now on, we will speak of deradicalization as a term denoting a process that encompasses all these phases.

Moving between phases: triggers, needs, and resilience

The phase model described above is an overarching model in the sense that it does not describe a radicalization process by distinguishing specific substantive factors that apply to each (de)radicalizing individual. Rather, corresponding with recent insights in such processes, it allows for a multitude of different routes including various (and varying) factors (e.g., Sieckelinck, Sikkens, Van San, Kotnis, & De Winter, 2019). In this section, we will elaborate on these (interrelated) factors, being (external) trigger factors, psychological needs, and aspects of resilience. Together, these factors drive processes of radicalization as well as deradicalization, and through this elaboration the added value of radicalization in conjunction with deradicalization in a phase-based model will become clear. Below we discuss how factors involved in radicalization can also play a role in deradicalization.

Trigger factors in the (de)radicalization process

Triggers are concrete external events that can play a decisive role in both radicalization and deradicalization (Feddes et al., 2015). In terms of phase models of (de)radicalization, trigger factors could help understand why a person moves from one phase to another (Figure 4.1). There are two broad categories of trigger factors that are identified in such movements: “catalysts” and “turning points.” An event is termed a catalyst when it slows down or speeds up the (de)radicalization process. This would mean that a person experiences an incident that makes him or her move up or down on the staircase of radicalization. An event is considered a turning point if a person who is radicalizing and moves from one phase to the next experiences an event that leads him or her to “turn around” and move to a lower phase and deradicalize. Trigger factors can be found at the level of the individual (micro-level), the level of the group (meso-level), and the global or societal level (macro-level).

At the start of a process of radicalization, certain life experiences (generally seen as pertaining to the micro-level) often function as triggers. The loss of a family member, for example, is such
a trigger factor (Pyszczynski et al., 2006; Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2015). It can lead to an existential (or identity) crisis which may leave the individual more vulnerable to the influence of radical worldviews which provide solace and meaning. On the other hand, gaining a family (member) can set in motion a process of deradicalization. Becoming a parent, for example, can be such a turning point, by instilling (new) meaning to one’s life—and adding the fear of potentially losing touch with your child as a result of your radical path (Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2015). Altier et al. (2014) point to marriage (which is often accompanied by the desire to start a family) as such a turning point, similarly emphasizing the heightened costs of involvement in terrorism and providing alternatives outside of the (radical) group. With these opposite triggers, we see a kind of mirror relation: The loss of a family member may propel the individual into the vulnerability phase and thus starts the radicalization process, while gaining a family (member) could signal the start of the deradicalization process, and lead to a retreat from the group phase towards (or even beyond) that same vulnerability phase.

The experience of violence is a similar event, which is often traumatic but also involves a sense of injustice (why me/that person?). Van der Valk and Wagenaar (2010) indicate that experiencing violence could be a trigger factor for both radicalization and deradicalization. Based on interviews with former right-wing extremists in the Netherlands, they note that experiences with violence can trigger a person to join an extremist group or can lead to further radicalization. However, for some individuals, the use of violence by group members influenced their decision to leave the group and thereby set in motion a process of deradicalization (see also Demant, Slootman, Buijs, & Tillie, 2008).

While the trigger factors described above are mainly associated with the move towards (and perhaps beyond) the vulnerability phase—from two directions—there are also important triggers that surround the phase of group membership. One of the most influential events leading to such group membership is the encounter or connection with (a) radical individual(s). Recruitment into radical groups often happens via people’s networks, their personal connections (e.g., McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Mutual connectedness can even lead a whole group of friends to join a terrorist organization at once, via so-called “block recruitment” (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008, p. 421; see also Kruglanski et al., 2014). These connections are often made or exploited as a result of chance encounters (Schuurman, 2017; Weggemans, Bakker, & Grol, 2014). However random, these encounters do play an important role in the process, by linking one’s vulnerability and the associated emotions with a solution. This is aptly illustrated by the following quote by former radical Maajid Nawaz:

It was not until a recruiter of Hizb ut-Tahrir approached me and confronted me with my anger that I became enthusiastic about the Caliphate which offered me an explanation and a dream. I connected my anger to radical Islam, a disgusting ideology. That step made me radical.

(De Wever, 2015)

Chance encounters can also have the opposite effect, however, and lure a radical or extremist individual away from his or her group. This could mean getting to know a person belonging to the “enemy,” such as a right-wing extremist’s brother’s girlfriend with a migrant background (Sieckelinck et al., 2019, p. 16), or it could take the shape of positive interactions with moderate individuals with more mainstream beliefs, causing individuals to question their involvement in the group (Altier et al., 2014). Another factor that may play an important role in deradicalization at the group membership level or the action level is disappointment in fellow group members (Bjørgo, 2011; Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010).
There are also trigger factors which do not have such a mirror-like relation: they do not occur in the beginning of the radicalization and deradicalization process. Rather, they play a role at the start of the radicalization process and the end of deradicalization. This is the case with triggers that concern family relations, such as divorce. Such events are often cited as being very influential in starting the radicalization process (Corner & Gill, 2014; Geelhoed, 2012; Lankford, 2012; Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2015). The role of family relations in deradicalization, however, is confined to the ending of that process, as family members often do not seem to spark that process, but mainly prove their worth in facilitating it, and providing a “safe landing” for those who have already decided to turn their backs on the radical group (Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2015). Similarly, losing a job is often cited as an important event pushing an individual towards radicalization (Corner & Gill, 2014; Kleinmann, 2012), while finding a job can provide perspective and thereby the decisive push for individuals to lead a more conventional life (Altier et al., 2014).

It is not only the case that the same kind of trigger factor plays a role—be it mirrored or not—in both radicalization and deradicalization, however. It can also be the very same event itself which leads to different results, depending on the situation and the individual in question. For instance, an often-cited event is incarceration and detention (e.g., Doosje et al., 2016), which has influenced some (radicalizing) individuals to persist in their path but left others reflecting on their choices and veering away from radical groups and ideals. But also, the earlier-mentioned events of marriage and becoming a parent could have both a radicalizing and a deradicalizing effect (Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2015).

Finally, events on a macro-level—that is, the level of society, politics, and culture—are even more prone to fulfill the various functions in the (de)radicalization process described above, and are perhaps less bound to the various phases of which these processes consist. Sometimes, they can fulfill a mirrored function, one example being the establishment of the Caliphate by extremist group Islamic State in 2014 as a trigger for (further) radicalization—by joining a group (“the winners”) or even to proceed to the final action phase—and the fall of that same Caliphate as a trigger for deradicalization.

Not much is known about the conditions or psychological processes that determine whether an event results in further radicalization or deradicalization. However, based on social strain theory (Agnew, 1992), it can be predicted that the stronger the impact of the trigger, the more recent it is, and the longer its duration, the more likely it is that this results in a shift from one phase to the next. A clustering of multiple triggers may also add to the likelihood of shifting between phases. One might hypothesize the same to be true for the role of triggers in deradicalization. One promising avenue of future research in this respect could be identifying the underlying motivation of individuals, as outlined in the next section.

**Underlying psychological needs**

Whether an individual is susceptible to a trigger factor or not also depends on that person’s underlying motivations or psychological needs. In the literature a distinction is made between different types of (potential) radical individuals (Bjørgo, 2011; Buijs et al., 2006; Feddes et al., 2015; Macdougall, Van Der Veen, Feddes, Nickolson, & Doosje, 2018; Venhaus, 2010). Four categories can be distinguished: identity seekers, justice seekers, significance seekers, and sensation seekers. Identity seekers are mainly driven by a quest for social status and a need to belong to a social group. From a deradicalization perspective these individuals would be particularly susceptible to trigger factors such as the disintegration of their extremist group or being disappointed by their fellow members or leaders (e.g., Altier et al., 2014).
Justice seekers are those individuals who believe their social group is being treated unfairly and generally is less well off than it deserves. Events that counter these perceptions would possibly be important triggers to deradicalize for these individuals. Furthermore, justice seekers may be susceptible to trigger factors showing the inability of an extremist group to obtain their goal. Significance seekers are primarily driven by a quest for significance. Individuals who experience a traumatic event, such as the death of close friends or family, may feel particularly attracted to ideologies which can provide more substantial meaning to their existence. Finding an alternative goal in life may trigger individuals to focus their attention away from the extremist group. Finally, sensation seekers are those individuals who actively seek excitement and adventure. These individuals may be triggered to deradicalize by, for example, being excluded from the action by their group or the disintegration of their group, and may be lured into satisfying this need for sensation in other ways. Furthermore, unmet expectations can also stir a process of deradicalization among these individuals. For example, one’s daily life in an extremist group can be much less exciting and adventurous than one had expected or hoped for (Altier et al., 2014).

The two shields of resilience

Resilience against extreme ideas can be conceptualized as “the potential to resist, oppose and/or ignore extremist influences”. In Figure 4.1, we display two shields of resilience. First, as illustrated on the left side of Figure 4.1, most people have a “natural” shield of resilience against extreme ideas. However, certain micro- (individual), meso- (group, organizational), or macro- (societal) level factors may weaken this shield and may make a person sensitive to extreme ideas and thus enter a vulnerability phase. In the group membership and action phase, this shield of resilience against extreme ideas has been further damaged or even completely destroyed.

As illustrated by the right side of Figure 4.1, members of radical groups in the group membership and action phase also create a shield of resilience, but in this case against those views that challenge the radical ideology. This is the second, “inverted” shield of resilience. For example, members of radical groups are encouraged to end contact with people outside the radical group (Bjørgo & Carlsson, 2005). This increases the importance of the radical group and the ability to build a shield of resilience against moderate views. This shield becomes stronger the more people become committed to the terrorist group. Thus, resilience as a personal characteristic may protect an individual from radicalizing, but once radicalized, a similar type of resilience may “protect” someone from deradicalization.

This also implies that, whereas in the vulnerability phase it makes sense to strengthen resilience to radicalization, in the group membership phase it would be more effective to try to deconstruct certain elements of people’s resilience to deradicalization. Sometimes, building resilience against radicalization may entail the same strategies as building resilience against derailment. An example is: offering a counter-narrative to extremist propaganda; this could work mainly in a preventive way, but in some cases, it might stimulate people who are already radicalized to a certain extent to question the message of extremist groups (Van Eerten, Doosje, Konijn, De Graaf, & De Goede, 2017). At other times, specific factors should be targeted.

Conclusions

In this chapter we critically examined phase models of radicalization and extended them to the process of deradicalization. We explained how trigger factors, underlying
psychological needs, and individual resilience against (de)radicalization can cause people to move between different phases in the process of (de)radicalization. Although in this chapter we focused more on the process of deradicalization, in general we think it is important to employ a phase-based model which considers radicalization in conjunction with deradicalization. As we saw in this review, some factors that play a role in the radicalization process may also play an important role in the process of deradicalization (e.g., losing a loved one may result in radicalization but engaging in a love relationship may result in deradicalization). In line with this idea, some recent empirical research (Sieckelinck et al., 2019) uses a biographical approach to describe the radicalization and deradicalization of specific persons; an idiographic approach without fixed cross-individual factors but rather a unique sequence of events and combination of factors for each case. Decoupling radicalization and deradicalization would not be fruitful within such an idiographic approach, because it is the same person radicalizing and deradicalizing in different circumstances.

Phase models are a valuable approach to (de)radicalization as they may help researchers and practitioners determine what level of radicalization or deradicalization an individual is at and which specific social psychological factors are relevant in each phase.

The use of phase-based models to conceptualize processes of deradicalization and the use of such models as a starting point to design interventions imply a consideration of the different psychological factors and potential triggers that are at work in each phase. This also results in a need for different types of interventions, aimed at people in different phases of the process and in different roles in terrorist organizations (see also Moghaddam, 2009). It is also important to consider the specific objective of the intervention; disengagement is usually easier to accomplish than complete deradicalization. Importantly, when designing interventions, the individual situation of potential radicals should always be kept in mind, as well as the specific context, to prevent overgeneralizations and assumptions about the phase someone is in. In line with this, Veldhuis and Staun (2009) suggest that it is “essential to examine the causes rather than the courses of radicalization, and in doing so to perceive radicalization as an ‘embedded individual process’ that occurs in the individual within a specific social and environmental context” (p. 3).

We would like to emphasize that previous criticism on (the use of) phase-based models should be taken seriously. Some criticisms on phase models were already outlined, such as the fact that radicalization and deradicalization are not always linear processes but dynamic. For example, individuals moving up or down the staircase (or whichever phase metaphor is used) of terrorism may skip steps as a result of certain trigger factors. This, we argue, makes it even more important for professionals to be able to determine in which specific phase the individual currently is and to be aware of potential trigger factors speeding up or slowing down the process. As indicated before, conceptualizing both radicalization as well as deradicalization as two parts of a similar process can help to emphasize the non-linear character of the process.

The concepts of trigger factors and psychological resilience point to important new research avenues. In particular, more research is needed that takes into account multiple factors in explaining radicalization and deradicalization. For example, more research into the specific interplay between psychological processes and people’s shield of resilience (at what stage does it change and how?), external trigger factors, and underlying psychological needs (i.e., needs related to identity, justice, significance, or sensation) in each phase of deradicalization may prove worthwhile. Such research can inform the development of
more effective interventions that specifically target individuals or groups in a certain phase of radicalization.

References


