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The Need to Re-focus on the Group as the Site of Radicalization

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## Abstract

The past decade has witnessed burgeoning efforts amongst governments to prevent people from developing a commitment to violent extremism (conceived of as a process of radicalization). These interventions acknowledge the importance of group processes yet in practice primarily focus on the idiosyncratic personal vulnerabilities that lead people to engage in violence. This conceptualization is problematic because it disconnects the individual from the group and fails to adequately address the role of group processes in radicalization. As an alternative, we advance a genuinely social psychological account of radicalization. We draw on recent developments in theory and research in psychological science to suggest that radicalization is fundamentally a group socialization process through which people develop identification with a set of norms – that may be violent or non-violent – through *situated social interactions* that leverage their shared perceptions and experiences. Our alternative provides a way of understanding shifts towards violent extremism that are caused by both the content (focal topics) and process of social interactions. This means that people's radicalization to violence is inseparable from the social context in which their social interactions take place.

Keywords: Radicalization, social influence, social identity, social interaction, collective action

Word count = 12,516

### The Need to Re-focus on the Group as the Site of Radicalization

“...Small networks interacted with each other in intense debates and generated excitement and a sense of purpose. These sites were “where the action was”.

Progressive ideological extremism and a heightened sense of commitment emerged from these intense interactions” (Sageman, 2008, p. 55).

The high frequency of terrorist attacks relative to historical trends (Miller, 2018) has been met with increased efforts to prevent radicalization. The global terrorism database shows that in 2017, there were 10,900 terrorist attacks from across the ideological spectrum resulting in 18,488 victim deaths. The United States (US) experienced 65 terrorist attacks that killed 91 victims, a 49% increase compared to the number of victim deaths in 2016 (Miller, 2018). A year prior, the US Department of Homeland Security’s Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism was published, stating that the “evolving threat environment” required a “proactive, community-based prevention and intervention program” (Department of Homeland Security, 2016; p. 1). In 2017, following a spate of 6 terror attacks in the UK in which 36 people died, the UK government pledged to more than double the number of people receiving rehabilitative interventions through the nation’s anti-radicalization program (“Channel”; HM Government, 2018, p. 10).

Whilst there seems to be a common aim across countries to prevent radicalization, the term radicalization and its associated idioms (e.g., de-radicalization, counter-radicalization, and anti-radicalization) are conceptualized and operationalized differently across multiple disciplines and areas of practice, and are hotly contested (Sedgwick, 2010). This contestation in part reflects central concerns of this paper; specifically, normative assumptions about what is radical or not; and about the social and psychological processes whereby people come to support or commit acts of terrorism, or indeed move away from terrorism. Notwithstanding

these debates, the Middle East Institute (2015) provides a useful set of definitions for understanding the ways in which these processes may be differentiated within policy contexts. They define *radicalization* as a set of processes by which individuals and groups, “develop, over time, a mindset that can—under the right circumstances and opportunities— increase the risk that [they] will engage in violent extremism or terrorism” (Middle East Institute, 2015, p. 1); *de-radicalization* as undermining and reversing the completed radicalization process; *counter-radicalization* as stopping or controlling radicalization as it is occurring (e.g., through counter-narratives); and *anti-radicalization* as deterring and preventing radicalization from occurring in the first place.

Whilst we recognize and incorporate these definitions, we also draw theoretical inspiration from the psychological literatures on social identity and collective action. In those literatures, collective action is defined as “any action that promotes the interests of one’s ingroup or is conducted in political solidarity” (Becker, 2012, p. 19). Given extensive evidence that people who engage in violent extremism do so for strategic reasons (e.g., Pape, 2003) – because they seek social or political changes (e.g., Doosje et al., 2016) – then engagement in violent extremism (terrorism) can be understood as one example of collective action (see Alimi, 2006; Sageman, 2017). If violent extremism is a form of collective action, a corollary of this is that psychologically engaging with groups (that is, a collective) is part of every journey to violent extremism. Such psychological engagement can be captured as *social identification*: psychological attachment to and cognitive self-definition as a member of a group (following Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see Doosje et al., 2016). Indeed, although decades of research have been unable to systematically identify underlying similarities amongst terrorists (Silke, 1998; Sageman, 2008), one characteristic that violent extremists share is their commitment to a group. As in the opening quote, Sageman describes jihadis as being radicalized through realizing that they were a “bunch of guys” with common opinions

(see Sageman, 2004).

Adopting the insights of the social identity approach means recognizing that radicalized individuals may be physically isolated (hence the term, “lone actor”), but they are not psychologically isolated. At the very least, lone actors have a psychological (if not physical) connection with others who share their experiences and understanding of the world, and who may be a source of resources and support (see, e.g., Swann, Gómez, Buhrmester, López-Rodríguez, Jimenez & Vázquez, 2014; Whitehouse, McQuinn, Burhrmester & Swann, 2014). If we accept the propositions that it is identification with and commitment to groups oriented around achieving a desired social change that are the proximal and common psychological antecedents for those engaging in acts of violent extremism, then the challenge becomes twofold: *why* do people seek out and join such groups in the first place? And *how* do people develop shared social identification with violent extremist groups and norms?

Our paper takes up this challenge. We propose that we must study extremist groups as groups first, and as extremists second. To explain how people develop identification with extremist groups, we draw on insights and theory about how groups form and social identification develops, and then describe the specific mechanisms that lead to the development of the potential for violence. Thus, to explain how people join and are socialized within extremist groups, we explicate general psychological processes of social interaction and social influence that occur irrespective of the ideology and norms of the group. We suggest that explicating the processes that leads to the adoption of violence (versus non-violence) should come after explaining a more general group socialization process although, as we describe in detail below, it is not separate from it. Moreover, we propose that people’s perceptions of their social context (i.e., relationships between groups, or intergroup relations) and processes of interaction, discussion, and debate within groups (i.e., intragroup relations and social influence) are central to understanding people’s mobilization to political violence

(and demobilization). Linking with the observations of terrorism scholar, Sageman (2008, above), we submit that group dynamics and social interactions are not just a contributory factor, but the very site at which radicalization occurs. We understand violent extremism, and social identification, as created and defined by intra- and inter-group relations and the best place to understand these is in the content of people's interactions in which they describe, share and contest, perceptions of the intra and intergroup context.

Adopting such a focus has several practical, theoretical and methodological dividends. The first is that a group socialization perspective highlights novel avenues for practical inquiry and intervention in comparison to existing research and interventions, which have focused primarily on personal risk factors or vulnerabilities for radicalization to violent extremism. Table 1 identifies a number of personal and group risk factors that are implicated in people's tendency or openness to engage with an extremist group: these are captured broadly as factors implicated in *processes of recruitment*. Such approaches help us understand why people seek out extremist groups and, as we describe below, have been popularly taken up by governments to develop interventions that aim to reduce individuals' risk of radicalization (e.g., Lloyd & Dean, 2015; Webster, Kerr, & Tomkins, 2017). However, such risk factors do not explain how such psychological commitment intensifies (i.e., social identification develops), nor why violence can become the preferred path for groups seeking social change (see also Horgan, 2008, for a similar critique). Although an understanding of the many, complex factors that influence involvement in extremist groups is welcome, it is nevertheless the case that we lack a framework for how those factors integrate or articulate over time (within person) and across levels (personal, group, societal; see also Cruwys, Platow, Rieger, Byrne, & Haslam, 2016, for a similar discussion in the context of psychological disorders). Perhaps most significantly, interventions that aim to address group risk factors without an understanding of group processes may have negative, unintended

consequences (backlash effects; Blackwood, Hopkins, & Reicher, 2012; 2013; 2016; United States Attorney's Office, 2015 Appendix C).

Conversely, and drawing on the social identity approach, we develop a theoretical framework that specifies the processes by which group engagement occurs: how people are socialized into groups, and how they mutually reinforce and shape one another and the kinds of actions they collectively advocate (i.e., a social psychological approach; see Post, 2006). In Table 1, examples of these processes and the associated interventions are specified in the column labelled *processes of socialization*. Theoretically, such an approach allows us to consider how perceptions of social reality (including contextual, political, economic, cultural, and ideological influences) are psychologically represented to shape individual cognition, affect and behaviour (Cruwys et al., 2016; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Such an approach can provide insight into how group socialization processes enable personal and group risk factors to cohere. Once someone identifies with a group and that group is salient, individual-level and group-level factors are not independent or indeed, separate: the individual is psychologically fused with the group (Swann, Jetten, Gomez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012; see also Postmes & Jetten, 2006) and so what matters to "us" is also what matters to "me" (Blackwood & Louis, 2012).

Practically, Table 1 also suggests that a focus on the process of socialization offers an entry point for interventions that is more proximal to the outcomes of radicalization as a collective behaviour. Moreover, because socialization focuses on the group it is scalable to communities (rather than at risk individuals, *per se*). Methodologically, a consideration of the interactive processes of discussion, debate at the most incipient stage of commitment to a group does not require access to difficult-to-access terrorist samples and may help to meet calls for greater adoption of scientific (Sageman, 2008) and experimental methods (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2018) into the study of radicalization and violent extremism.



Our approach is described in detail below. First, however, we show the importance of focussing on theory, research, and policy by highlighting common ways in which publicly available policy and strategy documents in the UK, Australia, and the US understand and address domestic radicalization (that is, the radicalization of domestic actors, either to perpetrate terror attacks in the West or to travel to countries such as Syria to become “jihadi brides” or foreign fighters). Our reason for selecting the policies of the US, UK and Australia is the similarity in the psychological assumptions on which their policies are based, and in the kinds of strategic interventions and regulatory actions that they recommend. We do not provide a comprehensive evaluation of radicalization interventions, nor do we suggest that these examples are necessarily representative of policies in other nations. Rather, we use these as exemplars with which to describe, ground and contrast our claims.

We then juxtapose the assumptions that are informing these government’s responses against relevant insights from social psychological research, and against the radicalization praxis of the group known as Daesh, or so-called Islamic State (IS). A key element of Daesh’s strategy to radicalize and recruit Western foreign fighters and to inspire Westerners to carry out terror attacks in their own countries was the use of (online) social interactions (Wakeford & Smith, 2019). Our analysis highlights the differences between how the models of radicalization found in government policies conceptualize why people in the West come to support extremist groups, and the empirical evidence for such accounts. Moreover, as we show below, there are stark differences between those models of radicalization and how extremist groups themselves understand their appeal and connect with prospective members through online interactions. This analysis enables us to focus on the areas in which current interventions and models of radicalization need to be expanded to enhance their sensitivity to the dynamics entailed in the praxis of (counter)terrorism, and in group socialization in particular.

## **Key Common Features of Interventions**

### **1. Enlisting stakeholders in communities to identify vulnerable individuals.**

Across all three policy contexts, there is an emphasis on enlisting wider societal authorities and communities in the identification of people deemed vulnerable to radicalization (i.e., those who have not yet radicalized but who are at risk of “joining the “Spectacular Few”” in the right circumstances,” (Silke, 2014, p. 4). For example, the UK’s Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, places a duty on specified authorities to have “due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism” (the *Prevent Duty*; Home Office, 2015). In a similar vein, Australia’s Counter-Terrorism Strategy (Council of Australian Governments, 2015, p. vi), seeks to “identify individuals who are at risk of radicalization and help steer them away from violent extremism”. And finally, the US had adopted a Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism (Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2016), which entails guidance in how to respond when “those closest to someone are concerned about whether the individual is at risk of being drawn into violent extremism [and] turn to respected members of their community for guidance” (Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2016; p. 3).

The associated interventions across all three policies comprise strategies for equipping communities and authorities with both the knowledge and motivation to identify the “factors that are often found in cases of radicalization” (Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2016; p. 9); and provide mechanisms for dealing with those who are identified. For instance, in the UK the Extremism Risk Guidance 22+ (ERG22+) framework (Lloyd & Dean, 2015; Webster et al., 2017) has been widely disseminated, including through workshops that explain the government’s model of the radicalization process and invite participants to trust their judgement and refer (Blackwood et al., 2016). In 2015, the Prevent Duty made this a statutory obligation for local authorities, childcare providers, schools,

colleges, higher education institutions, health bodies, prisons and probation, and the police (Home Office, 2015; HM Government, 2018; p. 36).

**2. Building resilience in individuals and communities.** In the UK, individuals who are identified under the Prevent Duty are referred to the multi-agency Channel Program. Between April 2017 and March 2018, the total number of referrals to the Channel Program was 7,318, of whom 394 (5%) received some form of community support (Home Office, 2018). Similar programs are in operation in the US and Australia; for instance, Australia's Counter-Terrorism Strategy (Council of Australian Governments, 2015) makes provision for, "individually-tailored programs that support the diversion of individuals at risk". In the US, local intervention teams (comprising mental health professionals, law enforcement officials, faith-based and civil society representatives) assess people who are identified as vulnerable to radicalization and develop individually-tailored support plans to increase their resilience (see the Strategic Implementation Plan; Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2016).

Engagement with community stakeholders is at the centre of these support programs. This is guided by the principle that local community stakeholders are most effective at safeguarding people against radicalization, by neutralizing individuals' vulnerabilities, addressing drivers, and providing support to buffer against radicalization to violence. In the terms used by the US Strategic Implementation Plan (Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2016), these community stakeholders provide the "off ramps" for individuals who appear to be radicalizing to violence.

For example, in 2014 the US National Security Council (NSC) piloted a Framework for Prevention and Intervention Strategies in Boston (United States Attorney's Office, 2015) and two other regions that aimed to protect vulnerable individuals from engagement in violent extremism by "upskilling" them and their care providers, schools, and stakeholders.

Schools were encouraged to develop programs to improve young peoples' interpersonal and social skills, digital literacy skills, self-advocacy, critical thinking and conflict resolution skills. The focus was on providing young people with appropriate mental and behavioral health services, and in connecting vulnerable individuals to mental health providers before they mobilized to violent extremism. The interventions aimed to reduce isolation, increase inclusion, strengthen families, support those who had been excluded or alienated from groups in the past, and provide positive community connections. In Australia, the aim of similar activities was to "help people get their lives back on track... [through] providing targeted financial grants, resources, advice and training for community organizations, to more structured interventions and government-coordinated programmes" (Council of Australian Governments, 2015, pp.10-11).

In addition to building individuals' resilience through these interventions, the programs commonly advocated disconnecting people from extremist groups and replacing those group memberships with alternative, "positive community connections" that decrease exclusion and isolation (see US Strategic Implementation Plan; Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2016; p. 7). In Boston, programs of civic engagement were developed to encourage young people to work on issues that matter to them and develop "democratic values" and a sense of belonging. The interventions aimed to reduce isolation, increase inclusion, strengthen families, support those who had been excluded or alienated from groups in the past, and provide positive community connections. Similarly, the UK's Channel program aimed to detach individuals from extremist groups and connect them with more varied groups within the community, so that their need for belonging, self-esteem, and identity were satisfied through other (non-extreme) social connections. The Channel vulnerability assessment framework suggested that a risk factor for radicalization is that an individual becomes "over-identified" with a single group, cause or ideology at the expense of

other groups (family, sport, their national identity), such that they “lose their identity” (see Post, 2005). Thus, interventions aimed to broaden individuals’ social ties so that they were not exclusively defined by one (extremist) group, and therefore they were more resilient to the influence of extremist groups and ideologies.

**3. Limiting the spread and influence of extremist ideas.** Whilst the interventions focus on investing in communities and supporting young people to find voice around their concerns, at the same time, these interventions are coupled with zero tolerance of specific proscribed groups and efforts to counter extremist voices and “us and them” thinking. Each policy recognizes that group-based grievances, and attributions and feelings of injustice, are a common factor in people’s engagement in extremist violence (as per United Nations; World Bank, 2018). For example, the US recognizes that their foreign policy in the Middle East, and aggression towards predominately Muslim countries, can create a feeling of “them” (the US) and “us” (Muslims). A report on the Boston pilot (United States Attorney’s Office, 2015) makes explicit that “U.S. policy and events around the globe can frustrate, anger and, at times, influence some to think that there is no effective alternative other than to express grievances or solidarity through the use of violence” (p. 9). The UK’s CONTEST (HM Government, 2018, p. 16) recognizes that Daesh propagates feelings of injustice through blaming the actions or inaction of Western actors for the war in Syria and the ensuing humanitarian crisis. In attempting to counter extremist voices associated with these group-based grievances, the interventions take three broad approaches.

The first approach is to develop and disseminate carefully targeted messages that challenge the influence of violent extremist ideas. All three governments have developed strategic counter-narrative communications strategies (United States Attorney’s Office; HM Government, 2018; Council of Australian Governments, 2015). For instance, the Australian Counter-Terrorism strategy (Council of Australian Governments, 2015) recommends

disseminating messages that counter and contrast with the specific claims of extremist groups. Thus, where Daesh claims that the Caliphate offers a higher standard of living than Western democracies, counter-messaging may highlight a reality of people experiencing brutality, cruelty and the likelihood of being killed. In recognition that messages coming from within communities will be more influential than from an external source, certain community organizations and information sources have been given the imprimatur of the State (e.g., Australia's counter-terrorism strategy mentions [islamate.org.au](http://islamate.org.au) and *The Point Magazine*; Council of Australian Governments, 2015, p. 7).

The second approach is to increase individuals' resilience to extremist narratives through developing their knowledge and skills for recognizing and contesting violent extremist ideas. A particular focus is the involvement of respected members of Muslim communities including Imams in providing young Muslims with information and training in Islam (e.g., [islamate.org.au](http://islamate.org.au)). Other programs are designed to more explicitly build resistance to "them and us" thinking in response to grievance. In the words of the Channel program, the aim is to guard against "understanding the world in terms of ingroups and outgroups where outgroups are seen as "bad, evil, or corrupt and the source of all the ills in the world, and in particular of the suffering of the ingroup" (Home Office, 2012; p. 14). The Boston program advocated developing young people's anger management skills as well as programs of civic engagement where, through working on issues that matter to them, they could develop their own narrative for peace and non-violent activism and the skills to implement that narrative within a democratic framework.

The third approach is to limit the spread of violent extremist messages through legislation. For example, under the Terrorism Act 2000 the UK Home Secretary can proscribe membership of specific groups that promote or encourage terrorism (e.g., the neo-Nazi group, National Action; the Irish Republican Army, or IRA). The legislation makes it

illegal for people to display public behaviors that suggest that they are a member or supporter of a proscribed group. Each country's strategy recognizes that violent extremist groups use digital environments and communication platforms to, for example, "spread propaganda, connect with each other, groom and recruit people, and plan and execute terror attacks" (Council of Australian Governments, 2015; p. 7). Thus, in a recent move, Australia has legislated to prevent the "weaponization" of social media by extremist groups through criminalizing the publishing of "abhorrent violent material"; this includes the imposition of fines on social media companies found hosting such material (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). In a similar vein, in the UK, it is illegal to disseminate content that is from proscribed groups or that contains content inciting racial or religious hatred or violence. At the time of writing, a white paper has been released suggesting that social media platforms should be legally responsible for the (extremist) content they host (Department for Digital, Culture, Media, & Sport, 2019).

**The assumptions underlying common interventions.** Across these interventions there is a discernible underlying theory of the radicalization process. Broadly speaking, susceptibility to radicalization, and to the influence of extremist narratives, is understood as deriving from a series of risk factors (also called "vulnerabilities", "cognitive openings", "sensitivities", "push factors", or "drivers"), including mental health issues, drug abuse, withdrawal from mainstream cultural practices, lack of appropriate skills/educational opportunities, and experiences of discrimination (e.g., Baez et al., 2017; Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009; Lloyd & Dean, 2015). This resonates with research on terrorists personal journeys wherein experiences of personal loss, humiliation, drug addiction and trauma often feature; and so too the yearning for identity, belonging, and a sense of personal significance (Kruglanski, 2013; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Post, Sprinzak, & Denny, 2003; Webber et al., 2018; see Table 1).

One concern, however, is that, in highlighting mental health drivers or physical health drivers (e.g., drug addiction), these policies revert to discredited explanations of radicalization as driven by psychopathology (Silke, 1998; Victoroff, 2005). Similarly, if interventions assume that resilience to radicalization can be improved through upskilling then, by implication, radicalization is conceptualized as being driven by skills deficits. However, again, there is little evidence that a lack of education and/or intelligence are elements of radicalization (Krueger & Maleckova, 2003; Sageman, 2004). Indeed, evidence from the UK seems to indicate the opposite where homegrown terrorists were, on average, better educated than comparable samples (Altunbas & Thornton, 2011). More generally, focusing on specific attributes or profiles has been broadly criticized (Crenshaw, 2000; Horgan, 2008).

To attempt to overcome this issue, the ERG22+ assessment framework, which informs the UK Channel program (Home Office, 2012; Lloyd & Dean, 2015; Webster et al., 2017), argues that it is not the possession of a single antecedent, or even a collection of them, that predicts violence but these need to be combined with the means to act (as per the theory of planned behaviour; Ajzen, 1991). This approach nevertheless proffers an individual-level mechanism to explain why some “vulnerable individuals” become violent extremists and why some do not. Yet, as we suggested above, focusing on individual-level vulnerabilities and access to the means to act misrepresents the psychology of a violent extremist: Whilst policies and research such as this often appropriately recognize the intergroup processes that might increase the likelihood that an individual will align with an extremist group (i.e., specifically relating to grievance and ideology), they offer little explanation for how people define themselves simultaneously as individuals and as group members. Thus, what is not clear is the dynamic nature of an individual’s relationships with group(s) and how they are both personally agentic as well as affected by processes within groups (e.g., social influence



and cooperation) and between groups (e.g., intergroup discrimination and competition) which have implications for collective agency and motivation.

This leads us to a key conceptual issue with current policy formulations and interventions: they organize drivers into individual-level vulnerabilities, family, community or group level factors, and societal-level factors such as conflict or foreign policy. Whilst there is evidence for the importance of many of these factors (e.g., Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009; Crenshaw, 2000; Doosje et al., 2016), separating drivers into “levels” means that there has been little theoretical focus on specifying the mechanisms by which they become integrated (see also Cruwys et al., 2016, who address a similar issue in the context of disordered eating). Re-focusing on group dynamics allows us to look at the proximal site and consider where, how, and why drivers come together to produce radicalization.

To be more precise, separating drivers into levels misses two key insights, adopted from the social identity tradition, that may help to better understand and explain the radicalization process. First, groups provide more than belonging (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995): they are important to how individuals make sense of the world and define themselves in relation to others (Turner & Oakes, 1986). Identification with and commitment to a group acts as the psychological bridge between individual and group, person and society, to enable co-action (see Thomas, Smith, McGarty & Postmes, 2010). Rather than being passively shaped by insidious group influences, people are both shaped by and *shapers of* social identities. The implication is that individual and group are not independent levels (see Postmes & Jetten, 2006) and this appears especially to be the case for groups which come to occupy a prominent and central place in how one sees oneself (self-defining groups; see Baray, Postmes & Jetten, 2009; Turner-Zwinkels, Postmes & van Zomeren, 2015; Swann et al. 2012). Indeed, emerging research from health psychology suggests that, rather than being a magnet for people with mental health problems or drug addiction, groups play a critical role

in supporting mental and physical health (e.g., Cruwys et al., 2013; Haslam et al., 2019).

Second, the key driver or motivation for collective action is group-based grievance (rather than individual vulnerabilities; Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin & Bialosiewicz, 2012). Groups provide a site where individuals argue and contest group definitions and understandings (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). If one accepts these two insights, the central questions regarding radicalization become: how do grievances make particular group memberships relevant or salient to an individual? How are the meaning of those grievances, and appropriate group reactions to them, contested and decided within groups? Without theoretical integration across individuals and groups, we cannot answer these questions and elucidate mechanisms by which individuals and groups move towards (and away from) violent extremism.

Specifically, the lack of theoretical integration of drivers of radicalization means that policies lack an explanation of the mechanisms of social influence by which particular experiences of discrimination and exclusion (for example, the narrative of hostility to Muslims in the West) lead to the adoption or creation of particular group identities (them and us thinking). The fundamental point here is that perceptions of social exclusion that are created by foreign or domestic policy (including anti-radicalization and counter-extremism interventions), are group-based. That is, people are excluded – or targeted – because of their group memberships; the notion of non-Muslims or government as a “them” is created by people’s experiences of themselves being cast as outgroup members (e.g., by policy). According to this insight, the radicalizing effect of “them” and “us” thinking is not predicated on individual-level vulnerabilities such as a lack of personal resilience to extremist narratives. Rather, it is predicated on group-making practices (such as surveillance and discrimination) that define people as “other” and so define relations in “them and us” (intergroup) terms (Drury & Reicher, 2000).

When people share and discuss common experiences of discrimination or other forms of group-based injustice (including through social media), they are able to collectivize their grievances. This produces a firm social psychological basis for mobilization around collective actions (whether violent or non-violent). Indeed, evidence suggests that the internalization of group identities in this way represents a meaningful and self-defining psychological transformation that is determined and shaped by group-making dynamics within the intra- and intergroup context (Buhrmester et al., 2018; Jong, Whitehouse, Kavanagh, & Lane, 2015; Swann et al., 2012; Whitehouse, 2018). When people are radical, the personal becomes political and vice versa. The group identity that they share with others becomes a structure through which their whole self is viewed, experienced, and understood.

In contrast to this view where identities constitute and create one's experience of self, the government policies we have reviewed assume that extremist groups lead to a loss (rather than gain) of identity. The idea that groups lead to a loss of true self implies that authentic self-expression can be found only when people are free from the influence of others and can therefore express their idiosyncratic stable and enduring personalities, feelings, and personal values. However, authenticity is not about what some external perceiver thinks your identity could or ideally would be, but it is about being recognized on your own terms, including in terms of valued social identities (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997; Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore (2005). Thus, anti-radicalization interventions that try to inoculate people against the influence of extremist groups (e.g., through connecting them to a broader variety of groups whose messages are presumably more moderate and compatible with the authentic self), miss the point that people engage with extremist groups because those groups recognize and validate their personal experiences and that such experiences can be self-defining. Therefore, by implying that extremist groups lead to a loss of identity, these interventions fail to address the social psychological processes that are at the core of group

engagement and its consequences.

To inform intervention policies about how they can work with rather than against group processes, we present a conceptual framework that explains how and why (and when) risk factors cohere for an individual to produce violent extremism, or become meaningful as a narrative to a group of individuals to justify and necessitate violence. This approach explains why some people engage with extremist groups and then perhaps diverge from that trajectory, change their psychological commitments, and even turn against previous allies (Blackwood, Hopkins, & Reicher, 2012, 2016). It captures why an individual might choose one (violent) direction rather than another (non-violent) one, when both directions offer the individual an equal sense of identity, belonging, and significance. In other words, in contrast to a driver-based approach, our approach explains *how* radicalization and deradicalization happen. Below, we demonstrate how understanding the processes of (de)radicalization at the actual site of social psychological transformation – the group – provides an additional, and more proximal, opportunity for intervention.

### **(Re)focusing on group processes of radicalization**

We focus on the group processes of radicalization in order to complement the focus on the individual in policy and research and recognize the causal contribution of societal processes and social interaction to radicalization. Groups, group processes and the intergroup relationships entailed in people's everyday social interactions are important in providing people with a social position from which they can make sense of, act within, and change the world (Turner, 1991; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Individuals may develop social identification with pre-existing groups, or alternatively form new shared identities (they become “a bunch of guys”, in Sageman's, 2004, terms). In the former case, the cognitive starting point of this process is described in self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner et al., 1987), which explains how people's experiences and perceptions of the social

context inform whether they categorise themselves on the basis of a group membership (Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994). According to SCT, how one self-categorises depends on perceiver readiness, reflecting one's prior experiences and strength of identification; as well as on perceptions of similarity and difference between self and others on dimensions that are normatively meaningful. Building on this, we present a group socialization process in which small group interactions are the psychological equivalent of crucibles in which individuals' personal perceptions, drivers, histories, values, and beliefs are mixed and become catalysts for qualitatively new ways of thinking about oneself, and the development of social ties and psychological attachment to a group (Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2016). Put simply, people can develop shared identification with a set of radical (or non-radical) norms – that may be violent or non-violent – through *situated social interactions* (Smith, Thomas, et al., 2015; Thomas, McGarty, & Louis, 2014). This process can help an individual develop identification with a pre-existing group, or help the interacting individuals develop shared identification with a new, shared social identity.

### **How Situated Social Interactions Give Rise to Radical Groups and Radical Group Members**

The process by which social interactions can generate new social ties and new social groups oriented around collective action has been described elsewhere as four distinct stages (Smith, Thomas, et al., 2015). In Figure 1, we present a schematic of these social psychological processes and their temporal location in radicalization. In this schematic, we locate the personal risk factors that are identified in traditional research on radicalization (and targeted by current interventions) as relatively distal to the radicalization process, in that they occur prior to the start of group socialization. If people perceive a *normative conflict* (a discrepancy between the way the world is – the *descriptive norm*, and the way it should be – the *injunctive norm*), these risk factors facilitate openness to social interactions about that

grievance. A grievance may reflect perceptions of the intergroup context, and in particular feelings of injustice due to illegitimate outgroup actions (Drury & Reicher, 2000).

The first stage of group socialization occurs when, subject to the necessary freedoms and opportunities, the individual communicates their thoughts, feelings and beliefs about that normative conflict with other people: the notion that what “is” is not what “should be”. This step is necessary when someone has a grievance or recognizes the injustice or illegitimacy of intergroup relations. Third, such interactions provide the opportunity for one’s (hitherto idiosyncratic, individual) perceptions to become socially validated. In this stage, others endorse those perspectives as “real and true”, and members of the group reach agreement on the state of affairs (see Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Similarly, ingroup consensus on outgroup stereotypes is used by ingroup members to mobilize themselves and justify and legitimize intergroup violence (Haslam, Turner, Oakes, Reynolds, & Doosje, 2002; Haslam, Turner et al., 1998; Tajfel, 1981), discrimination (Smith & Postmes, 2011), and conflict (Stott & Drury, 2004). Social interaction increases consensus about these stereotypes - a phenomenon known as *consensualization* (e.g., Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds, & Turner, 1999; Haslam, Turner, Oakes, Reynolds et al., 1998). Consensualization can create and transform shared understandings of social realities (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Festinger, 1950; 1954) and social norms for how to change those realities (Smith, Thomas, et al., 2015). In this way, social interaction provides the site in which shared ideas about grievance and social change can become the foundations for collective action. That is to say, the airing and sharing of common perceptions of a grievance are group-making and can create a shared basis for taking action to rectify that injustice (Klandermans, 1989; Klandermans 1997; Simon & Klandermans, 2001).

In the final stage, this process of social validation and reaching agreement (consensualization) provides the basis for the development of social identification with a

group that is premised upon the need for social change and the legitimacy and ability to achieve change through a specific type of collective action (i.e., a social identity based on a social norm; Smith, Gavin, & Sharp, 2015). In other words, when people discover (through interaction) that they share specific worldviews and experiences (e.g., of exclusion and discrimination), those experiences become consensualized (Smith & Postmes, 2009, 2011) and come to represent new aspects of an authentic, internalized group-level or collective self (see Thomas et al., 2019).

At the same time, radical voices within the group may draw on the personal experiences, ideology, and values of others to warrant their positions (“look, these people mistreat you all the time, how can they be your friends?”; “how can you support a system that flouts your values?”) Thus, through social interaction, individual experiences (e.g., of surveillance) and personal motivations for supporting a group’s cause can be collectivized – (“they didn’t happen to you by chance, they happen systematically to us as Muslims”). In this way, specific individuals can play a pivotal role during social interactions by leading, shaping, and facilitating the collectivization of grievances and norms for violence. Whether extremist (or moderate) voices within the group are more persuasive depends on the extent they make sense of the current context and frame it in such terms that the individual feels connected to the group identity (i.e., they act as *identity entrepreneurs*; Haslam & Reicher, 2007; Sani & Reicher, 1999; Reicher, 1996; Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins 2005; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a, 1996b; 2003). These emergent leaders<sup>2</sup> are those who effectively act as sources of specific narratives that create, transform, and make salient group ties and connections (see Bongiorno, McGarty, Kurz, Haslam, & Sibley, 2016, for an example in a small group context). They are able to craft and promote messages and the collective action frames that bring people together around a shared idea, or shared perception of grievances and motivate group members to act (e.g., Snow, Benford, McCammon, Hewitt, & Fitzgerald,

2014; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). They exert influence through shaping and then leveraging their own ingroup prototypicality (van Knippenberg, 2011) and articulating a narrative that effectively collectivizes a grievance (e.g., see Haslam & Reicher, 2007; Reicher et al., 2005; for examples).

The combination of consensualization and collectivization alters the significance and impact of experiences and beliefs by making group identities salient and leveraging perceptions of intergroup dynamics (Blackwood et al., 2013; 2016). An individual's grievance or perception of normative conflict will only become the basis of *shared* identity when another person validates and agrees with that grievance. Thus, social validation (versus no social validation) and consensus (versus dissent) on grievance are two key moderators of the impact of social interaction on the formation of new, shared psychological groups and new social identifications. These novel or emergent group identities are defined by a shared opinion about a desired social change, and norms for bringing those changes about via collective action (Smith, Thomas, et al., 2015).

### **Moderators of Violence (vs. Nonviolence)**

Whilst the above processes of consensualization and collectivization explain how new grass-roots social change-oriented groups form through communication and/or how people develop identification with an existing group (see also Obregon & Tufte, 2017), they do not explain why those groups develop violent versus non-violent norms for collective action (Khalil, 2017). We propose that (a) support for violence happens within the group because of the content (focal topics) of the interactions, and (b) that the content (*what* is discussed – the specific threats, suggested courses of action) is likely to be shaped by the intergroup context. In other words, such social interactions are *situated*, in that their content is determined jointly by the nature of intra- and intergroup relations within the social context: the groups one joins and the nature of the influence process within the group is dependent upon peoples'



understandings of the nature of social reality. Therefore, to understand the phenomenological nature of the outcome (the nature of the ingroup norms: violent/non-violent) that arises from intragroup interactions, we need to examine the context, content, and process of those interactions. Social contextual factors should not be understood in a deterministic way, but rather as providing opportunities for dissenting voices of social influence.

The form of collective action that the group advocates and their attitude towards violent and nonviolent action (see Sweetman, Maio, Spears, Manstead, & Livingstone, 2019) are likely to be shaped by intergroup factors that the literature has previously identified as catalysts for extremism. For instance, can “we” achieve social change via conventional (nonviolent) means and will the broader political system be responsive to efforts to change the status quo (i.e., is there political efficacy; see Saab, Spears, Tausch, & Sasse, 2016; Tausch et al., 2011)? What kinds of tactics have worked in the past (Stuart, Thomas, Donaghue, & Russell, 2013)? How do we understand the signals sent by powerful outgroups regarding their own strategic considerations and likely response (Blackwood & Louis, 2017)? How might outgroup actions, such as repression, inform our perceptions of (il)legitimacy and (in)justice, and thus shape responses (Drury, Cocking, Beale, Hanson, & Rapley, 2005; Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2009; Stott & Reicher, 1998)? Members of groups that have a grievance are highly sensitive to how powerful outgroups and their representatives respond to that grievance (Drury & Reicher, 2005; Wright, 2001) and have been shown to calibrate their responses accordingly (Louis, Taylor, & Douglas, 2005; Scheepers, Spears, Doosje, & Manstead, 2006). When groups feel contempt towards outgroups (Tausch et al., 2011), or that outgroup actions threaten sacred values and ideologies (Atran & Ginges, 2012; see also Mooijman, Hoover, Lin, Jin & Dehghani, 2018), actors may conclude that the only, or most viable solution to the collectivized grievance is violent extremism. Thus, the ingroup identity that emerges from intragroup interaction encapsulates a collectivized, normative set of beliefs

about the nature of society, the ability to achieve change, and the means for achieving that change (see also Blackwood & Louis, 2012).

It is important to note that while group members are aware of the broader socio-political context within which their group operates, crucially it is only where these have been discussed, validated and agreed upon that those broader socio-political conditions come to foster shifts towards violence. Experimental evidence for this claim is provided by Thomas et al. (2014) who compared the direct and combined effects of intra-group interaction and the priming of political efficacy. They showed that it was only where group members had been primed with a lack of political efficacy (implying the need for direct, illegal solutions) *and* those ideas had been validated through social interaction with fellow group members, that otherwise uncommitted participants were prepared to take relatively greater steps towards engagement in illegal activities. In the experimental conditions where participants had only engaged in group interaction *or* received the political efficacy prime, there was not heightened commitment to extremism.

Thomas et al.'s (2014) study showed that (illegal and/or violent) behaviors come to be perceived as normative and rational by ingroup members because of the intragroup processes whereby they have been socialized into their group and concurrently through which they have co-constructed their ingroup norms. Further evidence for this is provided by Stuart and colleagues (2013), who described how and why the environmentalist group, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (SSCS), decided to be "gentle terrorists" and adopt dangerous tactics to oppose whaling. Members argued that peaceful actions such as those that continued to be advocated by Greenpeace, were ineffective, and that governments were not prepared to stop the killing of marine life. Therefore, they felt they had "no choice" but to eschew peaceful protest action (Stuart et al., 2013, pp. 760-1). It was the combination of consensus on the injustice of outgroup actions (e.g., whaling), and a consensus on the lack of political efficacy

of peaceful actions that shaped their decision to use aggressive rather than peaceful action.

Similarly, Mai-Bornu (2017) analysed the conditions that led the Ogoni and Ijaw ethnic groups in the Niger Delta to choose non-violent versus violent recourses of action, respectively. The groups felt marginalized and oppressed by the three biggest ethnic groups in Nigeria. They experienced environmental problems caused by the oil industry, and yet did not benefit economically from oil exported from their land. In response to these grievances, the Ogoni chose non-violent actions and the Ijaw chose violence. The Ogoni started the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People. They demanded increased autonomy for the Ogoni people, a fair share of the proceeds of oil extraction and rehabilitation of the environmental damage caused by the oil industry. In contrast, the Ijaw people mobilized into multiple violent and militant factions dedicated to crippling oil production in the Niger Delta region. Mai-Bornu (2017) argues that the reasons for these different responses to similar grievances were differences in the government's responses that interacted with each community's narratives on violence versus non-violence, and thus affected the perceived appropriateness and strategic value of violent versus nonviolent responses. Members of each group leveraged the group's respective histories to justify their collective responses to the grievances. This meant that the Ogoni movement developed inclusively from the grass-roots, unified by historical narratives of colonialism and international solidarity, and chose peaceful protest actions. In contrast, the Ijaw failed to win international support and expressed a greater frustration at the use of unjust outgroup (government) force. Their responses to the grievances were characterized by militant norms that were polarized by violent government responses to Ijaw protests.

**The context and medium of interaction.** Each of the above examples highlights how processes of communication enable individuals to construct their (shared) identity and their norms for intergroup action. Whilst there are variations in the specific structural, ideological,

historical, and political factors at play across contexts, there are common elements of group socialization. That is, the contributory contextual factors might differ in different settings, and it is these factors that flavor the social interactions, but the process of social interactions itself should not vary.

Notwithstanding, different contexts of interaction have different affordances for interaction, in terms of the richness of the medium (its bandwidth for communication of verbal and non-verbal communication cues; see Daft & Lengel, 1984). Whilst face to face interaction is rich in that it enables real-time communication of both verbal and non-verbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, tone of voice), online interactions vary in their richness according to the affordances of the site (for example, YouTube versus Skype versus Instagram versus Reddit). The design and functionalities of online communication media can shape individuals' perceptions and the nature and outcomes of computer-mediated communication (see Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & de Groot, 2001; Reicher & Levine, 1994a, 1994b; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995; Schumann, Klein, Douglas, & Hewstone, 2017). For example, semi-anonymous online environments that rely predominantly on text-based conversations (e.g., Reddit, Gab, 8Chan) have fewer possibilities for the incidental communication of individualizing information compared to face-to-face communication, and thus communication may rely more heavily on social cues.

The internet also offers a cloaked space where political agendas can be hidden in pseudo-scientific websites and "fake news" is circulated to accomplish political goals (Daniels, 2009; US House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019). Material and networks are organized using algorithms that ensure that people tend to engage with likeminded others and can find material that resonates with their opinions (Geschke, Lorenz, & Holtz, 2019). Social and cognitive filtering mechanisms add to the effects of algorithmic filtering (Geschke et al., 2019) and can normalize abusive intergroup

discourse (Awan, 2016; Awan & Zempi, 2017; Lumsden & Morgan, 2017). Thus, online interactions often focus on group-based opinions and ideologies, making the internet a common location for radicalizing interactions. Having said that, the internet is not the only location for such processes to unfold: similar to the examples above, Sageman (2017) presented a series of case studies that predated the internet, and in each one highlighted the role of communication (e.g., by newsletters) or small group processes (see opening quote) in the groups' turn towards political violence.

To illustrate the centrality of the group socialization process to extremist groups, below we examine features of the group known as Daesh. We have selected this group as an example of a prominent violent extremist group who were one of the first to place social interaction through information and communication technologies (ICT) at the heart of their propaganda dissemination and recruitment strategy (Wakeford & Smith, 2019). This strategy demonstrates the pre-eminence they gave to intragroup processes in their radicalization efforts. Both their propaganda narrative and the role of their official and unofficial communication networks were tailored to exploit the intragroup mechanisms described above. Similar processes are likely to apply in the case of other forms of radicalization to violent extremism (e.g., right-wing extremism).

#### **An Example: How Daesh Leveraged the Power of Situated Social Interactions**

Daesh was ground-breaking in the way that communicating via ICT became an official part of the group's politico-military strategy (Ingram, 2019; Wakeford & Smith, 2019). The propaganda Daesh released in English was intended both to recruit foreign fighters to engage in jihad in their home countries (e.g., in the US and Western Europe) and to incite terror in those countries (HM Government, 2018, p.18). Whilst they were by no means the first extremist group to use ICT, they were the first group to recognize and leverage the fact that social media communications represented a key opportunity to establish

a global community of supporters and sympathizers who could spread their message.

This was, in part, ideologically motivated – Daesh believed in their intellectual superiority and ideological purity (the politicized concepts of “*wala*” and “*bala*”; Ingram, 2019; see also Doosje, van den Bos, Loseman, Feddes, & Mann, 2012) and thus they charged their social media operatives to become warriors (*mujahid*) and shield the *Ummah* (community) from intellectual invasion. They rejected all other ideologies and included a priority to spread the call and to show hatred and enmity to the unbelievers (the *kuffar*). Public ICT platforms created the opportunity for Daesh supporters to fulfil their obligation to call others to Islam (*da'wa*) and to protect their purity. Indeed, a Daesh publication, “Media Operative, You Are a *Mujāhid*, Too”, promoted the idea that the creation and dissemination Daesh content was a legitimate form of worship and could be a valid form of jihad (Winter, 2017; Zelin, 2013, 2015).

This strategy was successful - at Daesh’s peak in 2014-5, the group had a decentralized network of almost 90,000 supporters on Twitter alone (Berger & Morgan, 2015). These unofficial supporters of Daesh were known as the *media mujāhidīn* (Winter, 2015, 2017). They spread the messages of Daesh’s official social media operatives and created their own; and they were active in recruiting new members in Western countries (as well as in the Middle East and North Africa). The group inspired multiple terror attacks perpetrated by Western actors in the US and Europe (Higgins & de Freytas-Tamura, 2015). For example, in the days before the Paris attacks, Daesh supporters had used social media to call for attacks to be launched on coalition forces in their home countries, including in Paris (Torok, 2015). Through using social media, Daesh were also successful in radicalizing and recruiting many of the 4,500 Western foreign fighters who travelled to join the so-called Caliphate (Bodine-Baron, Helmus, Magnuson, & Winkelman, 2016).

Daesh’s leveraging of the *media mujāhidīn* created an entirely new form of online

jihadist collective identity: they were identity entrepreneurs through the nature of the interactions in which they engaged. Mirroring the processes we specified above, these interactions collectivized a set of grievances and people consensualized over how to address them (Wakeford & Smith, 2019). This enabled supporters to develop a coherent and cohesive shared identity premised on the need for jihad. Indeed, one cannot understand how and why people in the West – who did not share any offline connections with extremist groups – became radicalized unless one considers how their grievances and identities were recognized and collectivized through interacting with official and unofficial networks of Daesh supporters online. Those online networks were the site and medium through which group-based grievances were collectivized, expressed, and fulfilled.

Daesh's carefully framed and targeted propaganda drew upon people's experiences of injustice and discrimination to create and make salient specific group-based identities. They therefore leveraged normative conflicts about illegitimate outgroup actions to inspire and attract new group members. A case in point was their successful use of social media to recruit women as foreign fighters (known as the *muhajirat*; see Loken & Zelenz, 2018). Daesh's propaganda highlighted Western isolation of and discrimination against Muslim women, such as forced unveiling practices (an example of unjust outgroup behavior), which contrasted with the Western narrative that the West would save Muslim women and girls from mistreatment at the hands of Daesh. In an analysis of the social media accounts of 17 *muhajirat* who used Twitter, Tumblr, and Kik between 2011–15, Loken and Zelenz (2018) found that Western women recruited to Daesh used social media to communicate feelings of exclusion and threat in their home states and these interactions mobilized them towards extremism. Most *muhajirat* were radicalized online, with tenuous ties to Daesh prior to social media involvement; it was the social media interactions that created those connections. Daesh then used their *muhajirat* recruits as examples to destabilize the Western narrative that Daesh

mistreat women and girls. Thus, by harnessing illegitimate outgroup actions and rhetoric in their own communications, Daesh identity entrepreneurs created a narrative to further intergroup division, and radicalize and recruit new group members (see also Webber & Kruglanski, 2018).

The violent extremist norms of Daesh can only be fully understood in relation to ingroup members' discussions of outgroup identities and the political activities of those groups (Reicher & Haslam, 2016). Daesh communications often made salient Western anti-Muslim rhetoric, the rise of populism and the alt-right in many Western liberal democracies, the actions of the Syrian Assad regime, and foreign involvement in military action in Syria and the Levant. The focus on illegitimate outgroup actions in Daesh communications validated a collective perception of injustice within their networks. Ingroup voices in Daesh (often initiated by those who occupied a central, leadership position within the group) framed the significance and impact of those outgroup actions, and people's experiences of discrimination, in intergroup terms and thus leveraged and made salient existing group identities. These voices served to shape ingroup understandings of metastereotypes (what "they" think of "us"; Gordijn, 2002) including Daesh supporters' understanding of outgroup members' value-laden view of the ingroup's status, significance, and legitimacy in society. By creating a collective basis for people's feelings of humiliation and honor violation at the hands of illegitimate outgroups (Leidner, Sheikh, & Ginges, 2012; Lord Alderdice, 2017; McCauley, 2017; Swann et al., 2012; Webber et al., 2018), this narrative limited the availability and desirability of actions that could re-establish ingroup honor and perceived superiority. Given Daesh's sacred values (their belief in their intellectual superiority, the need for ideological purity, and the Prophetic method, the manhaj; Ingram, 2019), their collectivized grievances could only be satisfied by jihad (Atran & Ginges, 2012). Daesh's leveraging of the illegitimacy of outgroup actions in relation to ingroup values and ideology



therefore facilitated consensualization and collectivization and empowered ingroup members to react with violence (see Drury et al., 2005; Drury & Reicher, 1999, 2005, 2009).

In sum, Daesh's and Daesh supporters' communications drew upon people's personal experiences of their own and others' intergroup interactions involving exclusion and discrimination to warrant their positions and create a common social identity. Given that these communications leveraged the intergroup context in a way that made salient concerns about sacred values, supporters consensualized around a set of norms for violent extremist action (Ginges, Atran, Medin & Skikaki, 2007). In this way, individuals who came to support Daesh through communicating online became members of a common social psychological group and their attitudes and behavior became guided by the norms and ideology of that group. Collectivization and consensualization through communication were the underlying processes that enabled those individuals to feel connected to the group (i.e., social identification acted as a psychological and conceptual connection even though they were geographically distant), and the content of the interactions regarding the intergroup context and ingroup identity shaped the nature of the ingroup norms for collective action.

### **Conceptual Implications**

We have made two key propositions: first, that intragroup interactions can collectivize grievances and cause them to become a basis for shared social identities (Smith, Gavin et al., 2015; Smith & Postmes, 2011; Smith, Thomas et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2014). These processes tell us *how* people come to develop an intense commitment to extremist groups but do not necessarily explain the adoption of violence (lots of people perceive grievance but take legal actions to redress those grievances). Our second proposition is that the shift to violence occurs because of shared perceptions of intra- and intergroup relations that determine that the solution to the grievance is violence (Thomas et al., 2014). Our analysis of Daesh supports these propositions and suggests that we need to consider intragroup mechanisms of social

influence as the vehicles of the social psychological transformations that occur as part of the radicalization process. Without examining the intragroup dynamics of extremist groups, one cannot have full insight into the processes of how individuals become members of violent extremist groups (i.e., become radicalized), and thus how to intervene.

The value of conceptualizing radicalization in this group-centric way is threefold: first, we can leverage recent research in other domains on how social identification develops, and on how mobilization occurs, to understand how and why people engage and disengage with violent (and non-violent) groups. This may help to explain why identifying with non-violent radical actions or ideologies does not necessarily represent a position on a conveyor belt that leads to violence: the norms of the target group can be violent versus non-violent (Khalil, 2017; McGarty, Thomas, & Louis, 2012). Identifying with one does not necessarily entail identifying with the other (Louis, McGarty, Thomas, Amiot, & Moghaddam, 2018). In fact, we explain how and why radical groups that advocate violence may be in direct opposition to radical groups that do not (Stuart et al., 2013). As McCauley and Moskalenko (2017) point out, radicalization around extremist ideologies can be different to radicalization around extremist actions: whilst extremist ideologies and extremist actions often co-occur, one does not have to identify with the ideology to identify with the actions, and vice versa. By considering a focus on the small group dynamics, we can help to provide an explanation for how separate group identities can develop around (diverging) norms for action.

Second, if, as suggested here, radicalization occurs through social interactions, this approach appropriately and necessarily re-centers radicalization as a group process, and places intragroup dimensions as major, not minor, aspects, and central, not peripheral, to understanding the phenomenon. The advantage of this is that it articulates the mechanisms by which the psychology of individuals connects and integrates with the psychology of the group (because the interacting group is the crucible or petri dish for the emergence of radical

norms), thus negating the need to catalogue drivers that work at different levels. Once policies and programs recognize and understand these processes, interventions can target this mechanism to better understand and reduce the incidence of violence (Table 1).

Third, the group socialization approach suggests a degree of commonality across religious, ideological, and political radicalization, and thus avoids making specific claims about the type of group into which individuals might become radicalized. As Thomas et al. (2014, p. 21) note: “radicalization can be understood as a reproducible social process or pathway (Horgan, 2008) and not as a product of specific social conditions in certain societies or religious groups, nor an aspect of psychopathology (Silke, 1998)”. Indeed, as the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2016) recognize, with radicalized individuals there is no pathology to treat (see also Corner, Gill, & Mason, 2016; Silke, 1998). Non-violent radical groups can be an important vehicle for positive, progressive social change (e.g., the civil rights movement, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights). By understanding and operationalizing radicalization as a broader group socialization process, and (by extension) by understanding the reciprocal nature of the relationship between individual people and intra- and inter-group processes, we can increase our understanding of the social influence processes by which people develop identification with radical groups (both non-violent and violent). Without these insights, we instead revert to discredited, pathologizing accounts of the group that argue that its internal processes make people lose their grasp on reality (see Drury & Reicher, 2009). As there is little evidence to support the psychopathological model of radicalization, the current approach provides a necessary alternative to understand people’s motivations for violence.

The claim that intra- and intergroup processes are central to radicalization is not controversial. It is commonly recognized – by counter-terrorism experts as well as academics who study terrorism and political violence – that substantive psychological and behavioral

transformations during radicalization processes are driven by an interaction between individuals and groups (Atran, 2003; Gupta, 2005; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009; Neumann, 2013; Sageman, 2004, 2008, above). There has been a clearly articulated focus on the group processes – most commonly conceived as of social networks – that enable commitment to terrorism (Magouirk, Atran, & Sageman, 2008; Perliger & Pedahzur, 2011; Sageman, 2004; Sageman 2017).

Our approach departs from prior research in proposing that a focus on the intra- and intergroup processes that create and house extremist narratives and discourses is necessary. This is because the narratives and discourses of radical groups do not exist independently of the interacting groups in which they are uttered, shared and used as tools of influence. Thus, we articulate a conceptual framework that explains how social identification around violent norms develops through social interactions. This builds on Sageman's (2017) observation that in many of his terrorism case studies, "there was constant discussion, from which emerged a sense of shared social identity" (p. 19). What we do not know from this past work, and what we contribute here, is when and why discussion can integrate perceptions, experiences, and understandings to give rise to social identification with violent extremism, and how these processes of interaction develop, contest, and change norms for collective behavior.

Our conceptual framework addresses why, when, and how people develop ties with groups, and furthermore how those groups decide upon norms for violent versus non-violent action. Past authors have often recognized that individual and group levels of analysis are interdependent and connected by bridging processes (e.g., Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009). By taking a social identity approach, we integrate rather than separate individuals and groups. Here, we follow as the lead of Swann et al. (2012) and Sageman (2017), who have recognized the importance of social identity processes in extremism. However, whilst Swann and colleagues (2012) argued that individuals and groups can become integrated, they do not

explain *how* people psychologically connect with social groups/develop social identification in the first place (other than suggesting that social ties can come about via personal contact, encouraged by systems such as bloodlines). In contrast, we explain the processes by which people come to know that they have something in common, and how they decide on appropriate group normative actions together.

### **Future Directions: The specificity problem**

One problem in radicalization research and policy is the challenge of being specific in predicting *who* will go on to act (or indeed, interact with others). This is known as the *specificity problem* (Sageman, 2004, 2008; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009). For example, who, of all those people who recognize a grievance or experience victimization, will end up in social interactions that promote violence? Prior research has, for instance, documented the personality and beliefs of individual terrorists, and how and why those people are more open, or sensitive to the narratives and discourses of radical groups (Doosje, Loseman, & van den Bos, 2013; Kruglanski, 2013; Kruglanski et al., 2009; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009). Potential moderators of engagement in interactions about grievances might include, for example, opportunity, presence versus absence of deterrents such as surveillance, perceived interpersonal empathy, perceived freedom of speech. To understand who engages in social interactions about grievance, and who does not, future research should explore these moderators, ideally adopting mixed research designs including experimental designs (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2018). Notwithstanding, our focus on intragroup processes reminds us of the importance of attending to processes of group formation in interventions (e.g., how and why those people with grievances might create new groups) as well as processes of joining, exit, and importantly of contestation and dissent. Research on intragroup dynamics demonstrates that it is ingroup members themselves who can be the most useful people to contest norms and redirect groups from specific courses of action (Levine, Lowe, Best, &

Heim, 2012). This suggests that, even if we were able to identify who might join groups and conversations about grievances, we may not want to stop those people from engaging with the group (they may direct ingroup members away from violence).

By focusing on group processes, we explain why some people without a specific grievance might still, through those interactions, internalize the grievances of others: when they identify with a social group, other ingroup members' experience of discrimination become their own experiences. For psychological group members (ingroup members), the meaning, values, and norms of the group are self-defining (Swann et al., 2012). Thus, other ingroup members' experiences of discrimination become proximal causes of another group member's own behavior (see Blackwood & Louis, 2012). Thus, experience of victimization is not necessary for radicalization although it may help explain proclivity or openness to such groups (Table 1). Conversely, commitment to a group is both necessary and sufficient when that group has adopted norms of violence. Our perspective therefore explains how individuals without any direct experience of victimization can end up in communities that promote violence-justifying views. Which ingroup member is the one who mobilizes to perpetrate an act of terror, of all the ingroup members who are radicalized, is an empirical question and an important area for future research. A key reason why research has not been able to answer this question thus far is the lack of ground truth (a sample of data from known perpetrators of acts of terror that is sufficient in size and depth) and a comparable control group. This kind of dataset would allow researchers to study why the perpetrators went on to act whilst the others did not. So few people go on to commit terrorism that there is simply not sufficient or complete data to explore the differences between perpetrators of acts of terror and those who hold extreme views but are not perpetrators of violent acts.

### **Policy and Practical Implications**

Our analysis points to a number of principles that should inform the development of both face-to-face and online communication-based interventions. First, it is important to fully acknowledge grievances; any attempt to reframe or diminish the reality of group-based grievances serves only to invalidate people's experiences and cast doubt on the recognition and sincerity behind the communication. This is because, as Sheldon et al. (1997) and Shelton et al. (2005) suggest, recognizing valued identities with valid grievances is part of respecting others' authentic selves. Therefore, part of intervening appropriately may be to recognize and respect peoples' identities and grievances (and grievance-based identities) as authentic (rather than pathologize them). Note that, to avoid validating prejudices, this would entail validating people's perceptions of grievance rather than their attribution of the cause of and solution to those grievances.

Second, communications will be more influential if they are from someone with whom group members can identify and whose narrative is broadly aligned with their world view. Here it is important not to assume who will and who will not be regarded as ingroup as those who claim to speak from a position of wider shared group membership yet fail to speak for the interests as understood by sub-group members can contribute to polarization and consensualization around a more extreme position. Third, the focus of contention should be on both the legitimacy and viability of non-violent (as opposed to violent) responses to grievance. Importantly, the success or otherwise of this will in large part hinge on whether wider societal authorities are seen as trustworthy and as recognizing and providing mechanisms within civil society for grievance expression and redress. That is to say, alternative voices of leadership within groups (ones that recommend moderation rather than extreme solutions) are more likely to gain influence where their counter-narrative meshes with a perceived external reality. For example, when Jacinda Adhern (Prime Minister of New Zealand) responded to the Mosque attack in Christchurch in 2019 with a message of shared

national identity and solidarity with Muslims, she provided the model of the kind of national leadership that seems most likely to deradicalize.

**A note on online interventions.** The rise of social media communication has provided opportunities to predict, detect and disrupt the process of identification with extremist groups. Interpol has called for methods to track criminal voices on social media (Interpol, 2016). To this end, machine learning techniques have been used to detect extremist posts (Kaati, Omer, Prucha, & Shrestha, 2015) and online behavior associated with terror-related activities (Ashcroft, Fisher, Kaati, Omer, & Prucha, 2015; Brynielsson et al., 2013).

However, there are several ethical sensitivities associated with using algorithms to detect individuals, particularly algorithms that rely on group or topic vernacular (semantic content). Those algorithms are invariably temporally unstable and trained and tested on unvalidated datasets that do not include a suitable control sample or ground truth (independent verification of the identity of the users e.g., as perpetrators of terror offences, or their offline actions). Thus, the features (variables) used by the algorithm to detect and classify extremist posts are made unreliable by an unknown number of confounds. This means that their use risks erroneously surveying and identifying innocuous posts and innocent individuals (the problem of false positives). The specificity problem (and the associated problem of false positives) creates challenges for interventions because the act of intervening to disrupt a risk factor or mechanism known to be associated with, but not sufficient for, radicalization can create perceptions of discrimination and illegitimacy. That is, if the target of the intervention was not intending to engage in extremist violence (and perhaps also if they were), the actor/s will perceive the surveillance and intervention as an illegitimate and unjust outgroup action. Such a sequence creates conditions for radicalization both directly and via silencing more moderate voices; thus, interventions to reduce the risk of



radicalization (or to facilitate deradicalization) could have ironic, unintended consequences. This is true in both the online and offline space.

The extent to which false positives are a problem rather depends on the number of false positives and the consequences of intervention. For example, there is evidence of a link between diet and diabetes, and thus people are encouraged to cut out sugar. Interventions that encourage people to reduce their sugar intake are not likely to alienate those people from the state because sugar consumption does not align with a political narrative. However, when a particular grievance meshes with a specific political narrative, false positives become a problem for using that risk factor as a point of entry for intervention. Focusing interventions on individuals who belong to groups that are (or are perceived to be) subject to surveillance because they fit a particular group or profile is a source of discrimination that provides scope and fuel for grievance (Blackwood et al., 2012; 2013; 2016; United States Attorney's Office, 2015 Appendix C). Rather than being a solution to radicalization, the very act of singling out individuals from such profiled groups can provide the conditions for developing an oppositional or radicalized identity by providing the motivation to seek out information and engage in interactions entailed in the collectivization of grievance.

In making the argument to refrain from intervention based on profiling individuals, we recognize that there will still be grievances that are understood in group terms. What we caution against is societal authorities taking actions that stoke those grievances and can be seen to validate "them and us" thinking. Instead, we argue that intervention efforts will be more fruitful if they focus on sites of interaction (both face-to-face and online) where grievances are being discussed; it is here that what these grievances mean in terms of how one's group is positioned in relation to wider society and the implications for action are open for contestation. In the online space, interventions could take the form of disseminating narratives and communications, creating alternative group connections, and group

discussions that recognize and validate grievance whilst adding nuance to “all or nothing” ideas for action. Social media communications data should be triangulated with ground truth data from government/law enforcement agencies to enhance the discriminatory ability of techniques such as graph pattern matching algorithms (Hung, Jayasumana, & Bandara, 2016; 2017) and research that identifies signals for detecting terror threats (Brynielsson et al., 2013).

Once extremist content is identified, the question then becomes: what should be done with it? Due to the multi-platform and multi-purpose nature of the terrorist sympathizer ecosystem, deletion of individual posts and suspension of users from social media sites does little to disrupt sympathizers’ social networks or the accessibility of such content (Fisher, Prucha, Winterbotham, & Jones, 2019). Instead of training algorithms to detect the content (features) of individual posts and user profiles, the interventions we suggest above could target the intragroup and intergroup mechanisms of radicalization and mobilization to violence. Interventions that disrupt the capability of sympathizers to engage in consensualization and collectivization over specific content could disable the intragroup mechanisms that help form and sustain groups around violent extremist norms. Intervening to provide opportunities for people to consensualize and collectivize over alternative content could help shape non-violent, rather than violent, ingroup norms, and harness intragroup processes for pro-social rather than harmful social change.

### **Conclusion**

Terrorist motivations as driven by psychopathology, a lack of education and/or intelligence have been widely discredited (Victoroff, 2005). Similarly, accounts that suggest that unhooking individuals from the clutches of groups that subvert an authentic (non-violent) self also fundamentally misrepresent the psychology of radicalization. Yet, our analysis suggests that these notions specifically underpin the counter-radicalization and de-

radicalization efforts in at least three Western democracies (the US, UK and Australia). To understand when and how individual factors relate to radicalization, we need to describe the processes that create groups and group identifications that connect people, and people's grievances and perceptions, to collective behavior.

To do this, our article calls for a renewed interest in, and focus on, the intragroup processes that facilitate and justify (versus undermine and invalidate) shifts towards political violence. We suggest that it is time to move away from empirical analyses that focus on detailing individual, group, and societal (structural) factors in isolation. Rather, our analysis implies that instead of focussing on the individual in isolation, it would be more fruitful for counter-terrorism strategic communication efforts to situate those individuals within groups and address the processes (consensualization and collectivization) and perceptions (of intergroup relations) that fuel and polarize their small group interactions with hostile, aggressive norms. Ultimately, as we have demonstrated here, people's radicalization to violence is inseparable from the social context in which their social interactions take place – and social interactions are the site to look for answers.

**Table 1. Foci and Scope of Theories and Research about Radicalization, and Points of Entry for Intervention**

Focus of explanation			Processes of recruitment	Processes of socialization
			Factors implicated in decision to seek to engage with group or agenda	Factors implicated in development or intensification of commitment to a group and to take action to achieve desired changes
Temporal process			Distal factors create the social and psychological conditions that favor the appeal of violent extremism. These represent underlying or latent vulnerability that may motivate people to seek out likeminded others or groups/group material (Khalil & Zeuthen, 2016), but none of which are necessary or sufficient for radicalization to violent extremism per se. Factors are implicated prior to development of social identification with violent extremist group/cause.	Proximal factors are the processes by which people intensify their commitment to a group or movement, and its activities. In the context of the definition of terrorism as a collective action, every terrorist will have psychologically connected with a group (even if just vicariously, online) prior to committing an act of violent extremism. These factors are necessary and sufficient for the development of social identification with a violent extremist group/cause.
Risk factors	Personal	Examples	Marginalization, social isolation, mental health problems, education, family breakdown, loss of significance, need for belonging, drug addiction (e.g., Kruglanski, 2013; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Lloyd & Dean, 2015; Webster et al., 2017).	
		Interventions	Individually-tailored programs that aim to increase the resilience of individuals and support the diversion of individuals at risk (Council of Australian Governments, 2015; Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2016; Home Office, 2018). Often involve local intervention teams (mental health professionals, law enforcement officials, faith-based and civil society representatives) who aim to improve young peoples' interpersonal and social skills,	Reducing isolation by providing positive (non-violent/extremist) community connections.

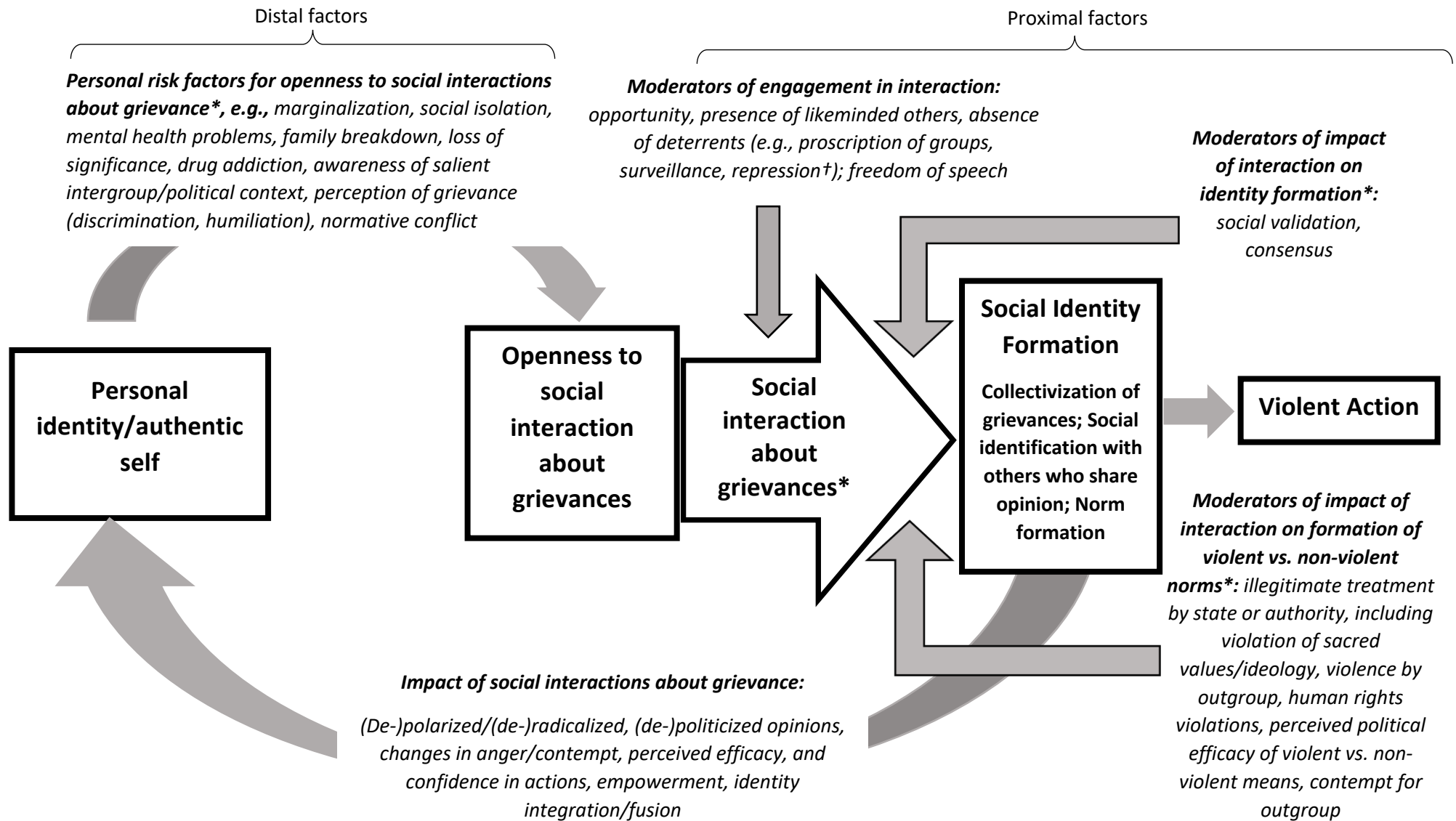
			digital literacy skills, self-advocacy, critical thinking and conflict resolution skills. The interventions try to improve mental health, increase inclusion, strengthen families, and support those who had been excluded or alienated from groups in the past.	
Group	Examples	Place in and structure of network/s (Gill et al., 2014; LaFree et a., 2018; Sageman, 2004, 2008; Swann et al., 2012).		Intergroup interactions with authorities, including illegitimate treatment by state or authority (Drury & Reicher, 2000) <sup>†</sup> such as <b>repression, human rights / sacred value violations</b> (Atran & Ginges, 2012), <b>discrimination, humiliation, cultural and value-based threat perceptions; contempt towards outgroups</b> (Tausch et al., 2011).
	Interventions	Proscribing membership of specific groups that endorse violence (UK Terrorism Act).		<p>Authorities and civil society organizations interact with groups that have grievances with respect and non-violence, and emphasize facilitating rather than frustrating those groups (Reicher, Stott, Cronin, &amp; Adang, 2004). In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authorities should be educated about the social identities of the various groups: their values and standards, aims and goals, their sense of what is right and proper, their stereotypes and expectations of other groups, their history of interaction with these groups. Authorities should then differentiate their responses accordingly.</li> <li>• Intergroup communication should acknowledge grievances (and grievance-based identities) as authentic and valid.</li> </ul>
Social interactions	Examples			Interactions with likeminded others (Wakeford & Smith, 2019); online interactions including vicarious interactions, e.g., watching YouTube

				<p>videos; reading content produced by violent extremist groups, or supporters of such groups.</p> <p>Interpersonal interactions become ingroup interactions as the interactions lead to the development of a meaningful shared social identity*. These interactions lead to the collectivization of grievances such that, for instance, “your humiliation is our humiliation”. Such social interaction with likeminded others in an intergroup context fosters polarization and extrematization of attitudes (Moscovici &amp; Zavalloni, 1969; Myers &amp; Bishop, 1970; Smith &amp; Postmes, 2009, 2011; Thomas et al., 2014) and psychological connection with a group (social identification; Smith et al. 2012, 2013, 2015). Personal and social identities become fused such that idiosyncratic (personal) self and group are indistinguishable (Swann et al., 2012), and group norms, values, and opinions become motivations for personal behavior.</p> <p>Through this process, individuals can <b>develop identification with existing groups that already have violent extremist norms</b> or with <b>develop a new group identity premised on the need for violent action*</b>.</p>
		Interventions	Legislation to prevent the weaponization of social media by extremist groups through criminalizing the publishing of “abhorrent violent material”; including the imposition of fines on social media	Dissemination of narratives and communications from someone with whom group members can identify and whose narrative is broadly aligned with the pre-existing narrative of other group members.

			<p>companies found hosting such material (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2019).</p> <p>Legislation to prevent dissemination of content from proscribed groups or that contains content inciting racial or religious hatred or violence (UK Terrorism Act 2000).</p> <p><b>Interventions that illegitimately reduce freedom of speech are used by repressive regimes</b> (Amnesty International, 2018). These actions may themselves initiate or increase violent resistance and/or extremism (see † above).</p>	<p>These narratives aim to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenge the consensus.</li> <li>• Create alternative non-violent group connections.</li> <li>• Acknowledge grievances (and grievance-based identities) as subjectively valid.</li> <li>• Add nuance to “all or nothing” ideas for action.</li> <li>• Mesh with the ingroup’s perceived external reality.</li> <li>• Provide alternative voices of leadership within groups that recommend, legitimize, socially validate, and make viable moderate rather than violent extremist solutions</li> <li>• Promote the perceived political efficacy of non-violent solutions.</li> </ul>
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*Notes.* \*See Figure 1 for moderators. The factors that may be related to violent action (as opposed to non-violent action) appear in bold typeface. This table provides examples rather than a comprehensive list of factors associated with risk of radicalization / violent extremism. Any resource that attempts to be, or claims to be, comprehensive increases the chance that critical unlisted factors are overlooked in subsequent interventions (Khalil & Zeuthen, 2016).

**Figure 1. Schematic Model of Social Psychological Processes of Radicalization**



Notes. Social interaction includes vicarious online interactions, such as watching YouTube videos and reading content.

\* indicates point of entry for appropriate interventions (detailed in Table 1). † Indicates interventions used by repressive regimes that may motivate (further) violence and/or extremism.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This understanding comes with the caveat that some people are motivated to join violent extremist organizations by socio-economic needs, that is, because they are offered paid employment and are living in poverty, rather than because of a psychological attachment to the group. It is the latter process rather than the former that we focus on here. However, because there are not always ideological or social psychological motivations for joining extremist organizations, policies should continue to aim to minimize poverty and socio-economic deprivation.

<sup>2</sup> By using the term “leader”, we are not referring to those who have formal position within an organization or group but people who are granted license by ingroup members to shape experiences, constructions, and norms and thus act as identity entrepreneurs.

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