

WHAT WE HAVE GAINED: PRACTICE & SCIENCE

Taking a bird's eye view of SAFIRE: The project's main
conclusions

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of SAFIRE was to increase our understanding of the radicalisation process. On one hand the results benefit people who work with radicals and the radicalisation process in practice, such as policy makers and social workers.

On the other hand, the results should also benefit researchers who focus on a more basic understanding of what the radicalisation process is, what drives people to move from moderate points of view to more extreme philosophies and the commission of violent acts, and what can be done to intervene in this process. In this focus paper, we consider the work we have carried out from a bird's eye perspective and explore what we achieved.

UNDERSTANDING RADICALISATION

If you want to understand radicalisation, you have to start by scoping the problem space and looking at relevant factors. Central to the radicalisation process, of course, are the radical groups and individuals themselves. They have *characteristics*, which may or may not affect their susceptibility to radicalisation, such as individuals' home life, education level or personality traits, and groups' links to other groups, internal power structure or internal cohesion. In addition, each individual and group has their own story, or *narrative*. This is the way they describe the world and their role in it. Finally, there are *behaviours* that can be observed, which may be indicative of radicalisation, and which can yield insight into an individual's or group's 'extremeness'.

In addition to the groups and individuals involved in radicalisation, we also must consider the environment or context in which radicalisation emerges. SAFIRE looked at the environment on two levels: *macro* and *micro*. On the macro level, the environment refers to, for example, cultural, historical or legal contexts. To illustrate, there is considerable evidence that not all cultures are equally susceptible to the emergence of

extreme radical actors. This is supported by on one hand cultural factors that tend to be related to an environment in which extreme radical behaviour can develop, such as lack of citizen participation in the political process, and historical factors on the other, such as an historical intergroup conflict. On the micro level, is the individual's or group's own personal context, such as the social or physical environment. The micro level is all about the *perception* of the environment, which is why two people from the same environment can have completely different narratives.

However, radicalisation is neither the result of the individual or group alone, or of the environment alone. No one exists in a vacuum; everything we are is the result of the *interaction* between us and our environment. Things that happen inside and outside the individual lead that person to behave in a certain way, and impacts that person's nature.

NETWORKS

Developing a better conceptual understanding of the dynamics of radicalisation meant bringing together in a network what we had learned about individual, group and contextual factors. In this network we connected the dots by identifying links among the various factors, which paved the way for us to test these links empirically.

Though it may seem obvious, it is worth saying that in order to understand radicals and radicalisation, you need to understand this network of factors that play a role in the process: What are the relevant factors and how do they relate to each other? In other words: to understand the dynamics of the factors is to understand radicalisation. This is most strongly expressed in the fact that each person and each group is a unique combination of their characteristics, their context, and hence their behaviour: each narrative is different, each life is different.

So then, if every case is unique and if hundreds of factors potentially influence the radicalisation process, how do you make sense of everything and focus on those bits that are most relevant? One of the advantages of using networks to scope and visualise such a mass of information, is that you can distinguish 1) very important factors from less important factors and 2) factors you can change from factors you can't. For example, the nature of a country's political system may be very important to the emergence of a radical group, but it is not something you can easily change. Better to move on to something you can change, such as the employment status of a group's members.

INTERVENING IN RADICALISATION

This brings us to intervening in the radicalisation process. Ultimately, one of the central goals of SAFIRE was to improve intervention programmes designed to halt, curb or reverse the radicalisation process. To do this we need to know what programmes are being carried out and how effective they are. From this we can distil principles that characterise effective programmes, such as their main focus or when and with whom they can best be applied.

SAFIRE found that programmes to intervene in radicalisation often appear non-systematic and non-systemic. Their nature, implementation and cancellation often seem to depend more on political winds or the availability of funds, than on evidence that a particular intervention programme is either warranted or effective. Generally speaking, programmes are not often evaluated to determine if they have had the desired effect. This is further aggravated by the fact that tangible goals and performance indicators are rarely defined *before* a programme's implementation; if goals have not been set, it is difficult to assess if they have been met.

In SAFIRE the work on intervention programmes and their effectiveness took two paths: one was the evaluation of effectiveness of past and current intervention programmes. The other was to evaluate a specific intervention programme before, during and after its execution. In our work, we found among other things that effective intervention programmes focused primarily on the individual's internal, psychological experience, for example programmes that help participants create a positive personal identity or reduce negative emotions. Conversely, programmes that focus the individual's relationship to the external world were not found to be particularly effective, for example programmes that focus on restoring the acceptance of authorities. Furthermore, if participants in a programme can identify with and trust the people who carry out the programme, a programme's effectiveness benefits.

Both practice and research in the area of radicalisation certainly benefit from better ways to assess intervention programmes' effectiveness. Policy design and support suffer when initiatives are taken in a seemingly random way. Understanding the effects of various potential policy choices *before* choosing clearly increases the chances of 1) successfully reaching policy goals and 2) not wasting money on things that don't work. Radicalisation research often suffers from a lack of 1) a coherent research paradigm and 2) insight into how best to research radicalisation, given its ethically sensitive nature. The empirical work on programme effectiveness in SAFIRE helps fill these gaps.

ETHICS

A large portion of the work in SAFIRE dealt either directly or indirectly with the ethics of work in the area of radicalisation. On one hand there is the issue of the justifiability (and sometimes the legality) of intervening in the radicalisation process. On the other hand, there is the question of how to carry out research on a topic as ethically sensitive as radicalisation. SAFIRE examined ethical questions surrounding radicalisation from a number of angles: from a legal perspective, research ethics, and differing cultural perceptions of radicalisation as something in which you can ethically and morally intervene.

From Day 1 in the project it was clear that not all countries see radicalisation in the same way. Some countries only consider radical behaviour worthy of attention (either in terms of research or intervention programmes) when it has turned violent – or at least when there is evidence of illegal activity. All else would be in conflict with free thought and speech. Other countries consider intervening in non-violent radical behaviour an acceptable way of preventing more serious problems further down the line. Aside from the legal and cultural issues that permeate this discussion, the ethical work in SAFIRE suggests that intervention in the non-violent stages of the radicalisation process is acceptable, but *only if* the focus is on improving individuals' critical thinking skills, so that they are best able to decide for themselves what they believe and what type of life they want to lead.

Ethical work in SAFIRE also looked at how to ethically conduct radicalisation research. Most importantly, we were repeatedly confronted with how to maintain research participants' anonymity, how to avoid their direct or indirect identification, and how to gain informed consent if 1) this potentially conflicts with absolute anonymity and 2) participants are not willing to sign an informed consent form. (Key here is the use of an indirect method of gaining informed consent. This is described in the focus paper *How to gain informed consent in radicalisation research*.)

Aside from the more procedural aspects of research ethics, there is the question of using intervention programmes as part of the research paradigm (e.g, using programme participants as research participants to gain insight into radicalisation, or evaluating a programme for academic rather than policy purposes).

This raises the question of whether or not participating in a research study linked to an intervention programme can actually be considered voluntary. Moreover, if the intervention is not ethically justifiable, it cannot be considered ethically responsible to use it as part of a research method, though what is and is not ethically justifiable differs of course by country and culture.

RADICALISATION AS A NORMAL PROCESS

Radicalisation is often approached as a unusual process, perhaps because it is difficult for most of us to put ourselves in a radical's shoes. Time and again we found in SAFIRE, however, that radicalisation is maybe not all that unusual. In many aspects, radicalisation resembles 'normal' socialisation that, along the way, may deviate from the common path, and go the way of extremeness and perhaps even violence: socialisation gone awry. As a result, in practice, radicalisation may not be all that different from other forms of deviation from the social mean, and thus need not be treated differently. As such, when interventions in the radicalisation process are undertaken, effective programmes may resemble those used to deal with other issues.

As with other non-mainstream socialisation directions, due to radicalisation's non-linear and complex nature, it is not possible to predict who will become (violently) radical and who will not. Extremism, however, may be countered by a strong supportive network to help avoid isolation and maintain an open dialogue.

MULTIDISCIPLINARITY

One thing has been clear throughout the project: making sense of radicalisation is a multidisciplinary endeavour. If you only look at one discipline to try to understand radicalisation, you will never be successful: the phenomenon is simply too complex. Improved exchange of ideas between the disciplines so that they can benefit from each other's insights is currently hampered by a lack of a common terminology. Different disciplines may use the same word to mean different things, or different words to mean the same thing. Harmonising the language used to describe key concepts would be a necessary step in harmonising the process.

As discussed earlier, there are many cultural differences in the degree to which non-violent radicalisation is a process that can be discussed, studied and influenced. In the context of a research project, this mainly provides interesting food for thought for setting up our research and for interpreting our results. However, at the level of international policy development, this discrepancy clearly hampers progress.

Before it is possible to develop effective radicalisation policy at the EU level, it is imperative that the concept is delineated in a way that is acceptable for all Member States. This is no easy task, but if unified policy is the goal, it needs to be done.

Though SAFIRE was explicitly multidisciplinary, we were unable to take into account all the disciplines that may be relevant to understanding radicalisation. From our work, we do see an urgent need to augment what we have done with what is known about human developmental processes, for example, moral

development, socialisation and the development of social networks. We recommend this as one of the next steps in radicalisation research.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this focus paper, our goal was to take a step back and consider the work in SAFIRE as a whole, thereby identifying the most important overarching results and impacts, for both practice and research. In SAFIRE we have identified many relevant characteristics, behaviours, and the internal and external forces that enact change.

With the models and techniques developed in the project, we are coming that much closer to understanding not only the specific elements that drive radicalisation but also the mechanisms we have at our disposal to affect the process.

The other focus papers address individual parts of the project in more detail. We invite you to peruse them at your convenience. If you have any questions about our work, please do not hesitate to contact the authors.