WHAT MATTERS IN COUNTER- AND DE- RADICALIZATION EFFORTS?

Socio-psychological factors associated with effective counter- and de-radicalization interventions

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> **Main conclusions:**
>
> - *Interventions aiming at factors existing within an individual such as creating a positive identity and reducing negative emotions are more successful than interventions not aiming at these factors.*
> - *Interventions aiming at factors relating to a person's relationship with the world around them such as decreasing distance to the out-group, offering ways back from radicalisation, and restoring acceptance of authorities are less successful than interventions not aiming at these factors.*
> - *Interventions carried out by front-line workers, who were also former radicals, are associated with higher effectiveness, especially when individuals are actively in the process of radicalising, in contrast to those just starting their radical career.*

We examined the effectiveness of socio-psychological factors underlying interventions aimed at de-radicalisation or disengagement from radical groups. Specifically, research experts in the field of radicalisation and counter and de-radicalisation judged a set of interventions on their perceived effectiveness.

These same interventions were also judged on the presence or absence of socio-psychological factors that are expected to contribute to counter and de-radicalisation processes. Results show that effective interventions tend to be based on *creating positive identity and reducing negative emotions* whereas ineffective interventions tend to be based more on *restoring acceptance of authorities*.

These findings suggest a divide between factors existing within individuals and factors related to the world around them. Analyses also point to the importance of trust in front-line workers in effective interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers and practitioners are in an on-going search for successful interventions, and elements that make successful interventions. This paper focusses on elements that make successful interventions. We do not aim to evaluate individual interventions, but rather to find successful elements common to successful interventions.

Up until now, it has been difficult to determine the effectiveness of an intervention – a seeming necessity when determining the successfulness of interventions. Both determining what constitutes effectiveness, and attributing effects (or the absence of effects) to one intervention have been problematic.

From the literature, several socio-psychological factors can be distilled that are deemed important for the radicalisation or de-radicalisation or disengagement processes. For the present purposes, we categorised this list into five overarching categories: creating

Even though radical groups differ across ideologies and other dimensions we assume that on the level of socio-psychological needs and processes there are many commonalities, and that all interventions rely at least to some degree on these processes.

For example, the specific content of interventions aimed at two groups (e.g., neo-Nazis or radical Islam) may differ but in both groups an intervention may entail pointing out to individuals their skills and how to make better use of them.

On a more abstract level, this activity may influence the individuals' social creativity (e.g., ability to overcome the stereotypes of one's group), identity and self-worth. Hence, building knowledge on the level of these more abstract processes may be relevant for understanding the effectiveness of both groups and to aid the creation of new interventions.

METHOD

By relying on practitioners' intuitive judgments of interventions and relating these judgments to the presence to categories of socio-psychological factors, we hope to make clear to what extent these categories are associated with success.

The present study tries to increase our understanding of the underlying principles of interventions. In doing so, we look for common elements that make an intervention effective, which allow us to draw conclusions for interventions at a more general level. Ideally, this will also guide the development of new interventions.

To do this, nine front-line workers from the United Kingdom and seven from The Netherlands judged 39 counter or de-radicalisation interventions. We asked participants to: "Please read the descriptions of each intervention carefully and then answer whether you think, based on the presented information and according to your experience and expertise, whether this will or may be a successful intervention or not" (emphasis in original instructions).

An example of an intervention is, a Dutch intervention that aims to break through a downward spiral and lack of possibilities, by letting youngsters participate in community service, receive support in vocational training or employment, and by developing a sense of discipline. We urged the judges to use their experience and intuition to judge each intervention, on four dimensions: at whom (i.e., which group) the intervention was aimed, the practitioner, the goal of the intervention, and the means and methods used to accomplish the stated goals.

Parallel to the judgments of the front-line workers, two experts from the University of Amsterdam judged the same 39 interventions on their focus on 25 socio-psychological factors. Table 1 shows the list of socio-psychological factors. Specifically, they indicated whether each of the 25 variables was represented in each of the interventions.

Table 1. Overarching socio-psychological categories
1. Positive identity
Social creativity / identity Self-esteem In-group efficacy
2. Decrease distance to outgroup
Empathy Direct and extended contact Self-disclosure Social norms Positive ingroup and outgroup exemplars Increase outgroup variability (De)humanization other Closeness to other groups Perceived symbolic and realistic threat Intergroup anxiety Perceived ingroup superiority
3. Reducing negative emotion
Perceived injustice Anger Frustration Humiliation
4. Offering ways back to mainstream society
Salience of costs (consequences) of group membership Inform about ways out Offer communication outlets (contact) Belongingness/connectedness Fun
5. Restoring acceptance of authorities
Legitimacy of authorities Trust in authorities

To identify the processes associated with successful interventions, we correlated the effectiveness scores given by the practitioners with the scores given by the University of Amsterdam experts in each of the five categories shown in Table 1. This leads to a picture of which socio-psychological factors can be found in more effective or less effective interventions.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERVENTIONS

According to front-line workers, interventions focusing on creating positive identity and reducing negative emotions are more effective than those not focusing on these categories. For restoring acceptance of authorities, the opposite seems true: interventions focusing on restoring acceptance of authorities are less effective than those not focusing on this category.

These findings point to a divide between internal and external factors. Creating positive identity and reducing negative emotions are typically factors that exist within an individual. They reflect how people feel and think about themselves, experience control over their lives and their self-efficaciousness. On the other hand, decreasing distance to the out-group, offering ways back, and restoring acceptance of authorities have to do with a person's relationship with the world around them. External factors seem to target the practical symptoms of and solutions to radicalisation, such as a distancing from other-minded people, starting a new life away from the radical group and restoring the radical's trust in authorities.

Interventions focussing on internal processes were judged more effective than interventions focussing on external symptoms and solutions. A reason may be that if you do not address an individual's problems underlying or contributing to the radicalisation, fighting symptoms and offering solutions will not result in durable change.

Finally, we also found two additional categories of common characteristics: decreasing distance to the out-group and offering ways back. However, the practitioners rated them as neither effective nor ineffective.

EX-RADICALS AS PRACTITIONERS

We tested the hypothesis that former extremists are more successful at carrying out interventions than other types of practitioners. This may be especially true for people who are actively in the process of radicalising and for whom restorative interventions are indicated.

Literature shows that people are more persuasive when they have no ulterior motive or vested interest and can therefore be trusted. Furthermore, ex-radicals may be more effective at carrying out interventions because, seeing that a goal is achievable (such as getting out of a radical group, and conversing with people who have done so) motivates people to achieve this goal themselves.

This is indeed what we found. Interventions carried out by front-line workers, who were also former radicals, are associated with higher effectiveness, especially when individuals are already actively engaged in a radicalisation process, in contrast to those just starting their radical career.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TYPES OF RADICAL GROUPS

Of the 39 interventions reviewed, fifteen were aimed at right-wing radicalisation and sixteen were aimed at Islamic radicalisation. The question arises if interventions for the two types of radical groups are based on the same or on different social-psychological factors. This is important because differences in approaches may suggest that front-line workers view the problems and answers differently for the two groups.

Our findings show that interventions designed for both right-wing and Islamic radicals are based on same socio-psychological factors. This means that similar approaches are considered suitable for different extremist groups.

CONCLUSIONS

The work described here aimed to evaluate counter and de-radicalisation interventions and identify underlying factors that contribute to the effectiveness of such interventions. It has been debated if it is possible to evaluate interventions in order to reach uniform recommendations. We suggest that investigating types of interventions and looking for common underlying

characteristics rather than evaluating specific individual intervention programmes, may circumvent this problem and allow for conclusions on a more generic level.

Research supports the notion that experts, such as our front-line workers, have a great amount of implicit knowledge that enables them to intuitively distinguish successful from less successful interventions. Front-line workers' perspectives may, however, also suffer from a host of factors that commonly bias peoples' perceptions of reality, such as stereotypes and other heuristics. In the absence of more objective measures of intervention effectiveness, we think that the present use of subjective ratings is the best available alternative. Nevertheless, the conclusions should be considered in light of this caveat.

In sum, we recommend that the construction of interventions should consider the extent to which the intervention affects each of the socio-psychological categories mentioned in this report. In addition the construction of interventions should take into account how to measure or judge effectiveness.

The effectiveness of a particular intervention can only be compared to another, even on a generic level as has been done in the present study, if it is measured or determined in some way. We therefore strongly urge policymakers and front-line workers to be explicit about the measurement of effectiveness (e.g., by the means used in this report) and to make effectiveness measurements a mandatory part of interventions.

This furthers everyone's understanding of which types of interventions work and which do not and helps practitioners reach their goals more successfully.