OBSERVABLE INDICATORS OF POSSIBLE RADICALISATION

An operational tool developed from actual practices of first-line workers across Europe to help counter- and de-radicalization practitioners identify individuals who may be in the process of radicalization, and how to use this tool in a way that preserves citizens' democratic rights

Joanna Pliner,
ISCA
September 2013

Observable indicators of possible radicalisation

Introduction

In democratic societies, "radical" is not an actionable label. People can have radical opinions, change their world view and move from one social network to another. Radicalisation toward violent extremism is a concern, however, for the wellbeing of the general public and the democratic system. In SAFIRE we examine radicalisation toward violent extremism in light of being a non-linear socio-psychological process. First-line workers who contributed to SAFIRE research expressed that a change in personal identification is an underpinning factor in the process of radicalisation that affects all other observable changes. This validates the notion that a change in a person's identity can be a cause of concern with regard to radicalisation.

In order to navigate the space between honouring the democratic right to free thought and preventing violent events, SAFIRE developed observable indicators of possible radicalisation to help practitioners identify individuals who may be radicalising toward violent extremism. An observable indicator is an apparent change in someone's demeanour that can be noticed by observation or engaging in surface interaction, as opposed to in-depth social and/or psychological involvement. Each indicator is just that—it *indicates* that a person may be radicalising toward violent extremism; it does not automatically deem them radical and/or a threat.

Manifesting most of these indicators is, on one hand, not illegal, and on the other hand could be of concern to someone trying to prevent acts of violent extremism. It is therefore essential to make use of these observable indicators in a way that helps counter-radicalisation efforts but does not infringe on people's rights. To accomplish this, practitioners must acknowledge that all but one of these indicators are only significant if present in conjunction with at least one other indicator. If only one indicator is present, it cannot be considered an actionable indicator of possible radicalisation.

The observable indicators developed by the SAFIRE project are visual manifestations of possible radicalisation. They can be used by practitioners as tools for detecting possible radicalisation toward violent extremism. Singular observable indicators are not alone proof of radicalisation or intentions to commit extremist violence. Rather, each indicator is a signal that a given person may be in the process of radicalisation, which can only be clarified by considering other surrounding factors. If using the observable indicators leads a practitioner to think an individual may be in the process of radicalisation toward violent extremism, they need to then address the process, not make rash decisions that violate the rights of that individual.

These observable indicators fill the gap between concern and action for counter-radicalisation practitioners. They provide a reference by which to make decisions about whether action is necessary regarding possible radicalisation. If a practitioner thinks an individual may be radicalising toward violence, they can refer to the observable indicators to see if more than one of them resonates with what they have observed in that individual.

Additionally, if a practitioner notices someone exhibiting a particular observable indicator, they can check the list of indicators to see if any more are relevant in order to help them decide whether to take further action. The observable indicators are a reflection of the current practice of first-line workers in the field of counter-radicalisation across disciplines and specialties. They provide a resource for determining whether an individual is radicalising, and if so, at which point in the process of radicalisation they are and whether action is necessary.

Method

In order to acquire a better understanding of the process of radicalisation, and of the current practices of detecting radicalisation in Europe, we explored the knowledge of first-line workers, as conveyed by workers who actually carry out counter-radicalisation initiatives. We conducted personal interviews with 13 first-line workers from the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway, and conducted workshops in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

To be considered a first-line worker, and therefore to be asked to participate in the data collection for the observable indicators of possible radicalisation, each person had to be involved with de-radicalisation, radicalisation prevention, and/or disengagement efforts on a professional basis. This includes: people who work at an organisation that has the objective of preventing radicalisation, affecting de-radicalisation, and/or affecting disengagement in individuals or groups, as well as professionals who are involved in counter-

radicalisation programmes such as social workers, police officers and teachers. We additionally addressed some community representatives who work closely with the police to better understand and prevent radicalisation.

Via these interviews and workshops we collected information about indicators that may signify a progression within the process of radicalisation. The compilation of information from primary sources sheds light on the current practice of counter-radicalisation efforts and shows how socio-psychological factors of radicalisation and radicalism are believed to manifest themselves into observable indicators that can be noted and acted upon by first-line workers if necessary.

We analysed the input of first-line workers across specialties and practices to arrive at the categorisation of observable indicators currently used by practitioners in Europe.

The 28 participants can be categorised into four groups: those associated with programmes focusing on right-wing radicalisation (21.4%), those associated with programmes focusing on Islamic radicalisation (39.3%), those associated with law enforcement (25%), and those associated with groups that do not specialise in a specific type of radicalisation (14.3%). This distribution can be seen in the graph below.

Participating First-Line Workers
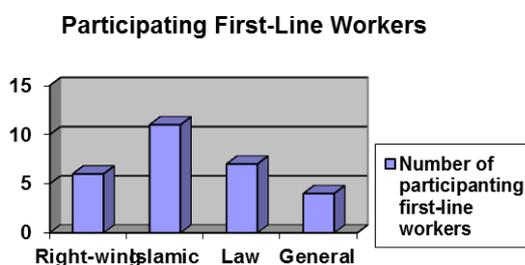
Results and conclusions

As previously mentioned, for the purposes of SAFIRE an observable indicator is an apparent change in a person's demeanour that can be noticed by observation or engaging in surface interaction, as opposed to in-depth social and/or psychological involvement.

These observable changes in demeanour, behaviour and conduct that may signify a progression within the process of radicalisation, which we derived from first-hand interviews and workshops with first-line workers, are categorised into the following five categories:

1. **Self-identification** – the way individuals define their own character
2. **Us vs. Them Societal View** – individuals see society as a whole as an opposition to which they cannot relate
3. **Social Interaction** – the way individuals interact with society
4. **Persona** – individuals' personality and expression of emotion
5. **Association** – relationships with, or representation of connection to, radical groups

The observable indicators catalogued here are signs by which the process of radicalisation can manifest itself visually. While the initial appearance of any of the following observable indicators may seem sudden or rash from an outside perspective, the decision—whether it be to admire a new social leader, change one's attire or adapt a more violent demeanour—is rarely so sudden or rash. The socio-psychological process of radicalisation begins before notable observable indicators are expressed. As a precautionary measure against misuse of these observable indicators for profiling purposes, they are expressly only to be utilised by counter-radicalisation practitioners, and even so, to be used with caution.

Only someone who is familiar with how the individual behaved prior to identifying the observable indicators—and therefore has a point of comparison—will be able to appropriately evaluate whether the relevant changes in behaviour may indicate possible radicalisation and require further inquiry. Due to the qualitative nature of the data collected, it is not possible to quantitatively compare the information collected through the interviews and workshops in a detailed way. We can, however, highlight general patterns to clarify which indicators generated considerable discussion.

Below is the full list of observable indicators of possible radicalisation. Full descriptions of the observable indicators can be obtained by contacting a SAFIRE representative.

A. **Self-identification**
   1. Naming New Ideological Leaders/Role Models
   2. Lingering Concern with Questions of Meaning and Identity
   3. Concentrated Self-image
   4. Very Strong Devotion to a Particular Change
   5. Newfound Patriotism

B. **Us vs. Them Societal View**
   6. Seeing Society as the Enemy
   7. Verbal Expression against the Government
   8. Expressed Feelings of Disconnection
   9. Change in Personal Narrative

C. Social Interaction
10. Disconnecting with Former Community
11. Initiating Personal Violence
12. Forcing Customs on Others
13. Untouchable Demeanour
14. Dependence on Communication Technology

D. Persona
15. Change in Personality
16. Particular Emotional Expressions

E. Association
17. Associating with Extremist Groups
18. Word Choice
19. Change in Physical Appearance and/or Attire
20. Internet Identity
21. Training Travel

The graph below titled *Number of First-Line Workers Mentioning Each Observable Indicator* shows how many participating first-line workers expressed that each of the observable indicators signifies possible progression in the process of radicalisation. Out of the 21 observable indicators, the five most frequently mentioned were:

1. Change in Physical Appearance/Attire
2. Disconnecting from Former Community
3. Verbal Expression against the Government
4. Expressed Feelings of Disconnection
5. Associating with Extremist Groups

Furthermore, here you can see the most frequently mentioned observable indicators per specialisation of first-line worker:

- Right Wing:
  1. Change in Physical Appearance and/or Attire
  2. Associating with Extremist Groups

- Islamic (the following four indicators were mentioned by the same number of first-line workers associated with Islamic radicalisation):
  1. Verbal Expression against the Government
  2. Expressed Feelings of Disconnection
  3. Disconnecting from Former Community
  4. Change in Physical Appearance and/or Attire

- Law Enforcement:
  1. Change in Physical Appearance and/or Attire
  2. Disconnecting from Former Community

- General (indicators 2- 6 were mentioned by the same number of first-line workers not associated with a specific type of radicalisation):
  1. Change in Physical Appearance and/or Attire
  2. Word Choice
  3. Associating with Extremist Groups
  4. Disconnecting from Former Community
  5. Expressed Feelings of Disconnection
  6. Verbal Expression against the Government

Number of First-Line Workers Mentioning Each Observable Indicator

Legend:
- Training Travel
- Internet Identity
- Change in Physical Appearance/Attire
- Word Choice
- Associating with Extremist Groups
- Expression of Particular Emotions
- Change in Personality
- Dependence on Technology
- Untouchable Demeanor
- Initiating Personal Violence
- Disconnecting from Former Community
- Forcing Customs on Others
- Change in Personal Narrative
- Expressed Feelings of Disconnection
- Verbal Expression Against the Government
- Viewing Society as the Enemy
- Newfound Patriotism
- Devotion to a Particular Change
- Concentrated Self-Image
- Lingering Concerns of Identity
- New Ideological Leaders