Online radicalisation: the use of the internet by Islamic State terrorists in the US (2012-2018)

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Chapter 2: The Conceptual Ambiguity of Radicalisation

2.1 Introduction

Before moving to a discussion of the role of the Internet in radicalisation, it is first prudent to conceptually investigate what is meant by "radicalisation". There is a considerable ambiguity surrounding the deployment of the word. It is usually used to mean a process towards one of three end points: becoming a terrorist, an extremist, or a radical. These end points are not causally related and each can have substantially different normative connotations, which further exacerbate the lack of conceptual clarity. At the heart of this ambiguity is a disagreement as to whether radicalisation is a cognitive or behavioural phenomenon – that is to say, whether the process is complete with the adoption of a set of beliefs, or whether a specific behaviour must be undertaken. This thesis adopts a working definition of radicalisation that focused on terrorists' antecedent behaviours. The chapter then moves on to ambiguities that are inherent to the concept of "online radicalisation," questioning what role the Internet must play for a terrorist to be deemed to have radicalised online.

This chapter then moves to research which attempts to theorise and model the process of radicalisation, finding that many of these attempts have fallen short, relying on unsystematic evidence and not lending themselves to empirical testing. It then gives an overview of the existing empirical evidence into common factors in radicalisation including age, gender, socioeconomic factors, education, environment, the role of converts, criminal experiences, and mental health. While attempts to profile terrorism have tended to fail, there are some commonalities that may be associated with radicalisation, even if they are neither necessary or sufficient.

2.2 Conceptual Clarity

2.2.1 Definition, Interchangeability, and Derivatives

One of the problems pertaining to the study of radicalisation is the number of conceptual disagreements which ultimately make defining the term difficult. When the word is used, it can be in relation to the process in which an individual comes to engage in terrorism, extremism, or radicalism. This divergence of definitions means that there is a debate regarding the end point of radicalisation; whether one is radicalised towards extreme beliefs or extreme actions.

Despite the conceptual differences, there is one universal point of agreement – radicalisation is a process; the nature of the suffix of the word – *isation* – implies a specific event happening, from before to afterwards. Just as the word "homogenisation" refers to the process of two or more separate things becoming similar or identical, "radicalisation" undeniably refers to a process (For example, see: Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman 2009; Borum 2011; Helfstein 2012; Canetti et al. 2013; Doosje et al. 2016). Importantly, neither

of the words that are most often associated in common parlance with radicalisation – terrorism and extremism – carry the same suffix, nor do they have derivative words that denote a process.[1] There is no "extremisation" and "terrorisation" does not denote the process of becoming a terrorist. Although this may seem like a semantic triviality, the lack of appropriate *isation* suffix results in the term radicalisation becoming a catch-all word for the process towards terrorism and extremism, which has compounded many of the conceptual difficulties, as can be seen in Figure 1.

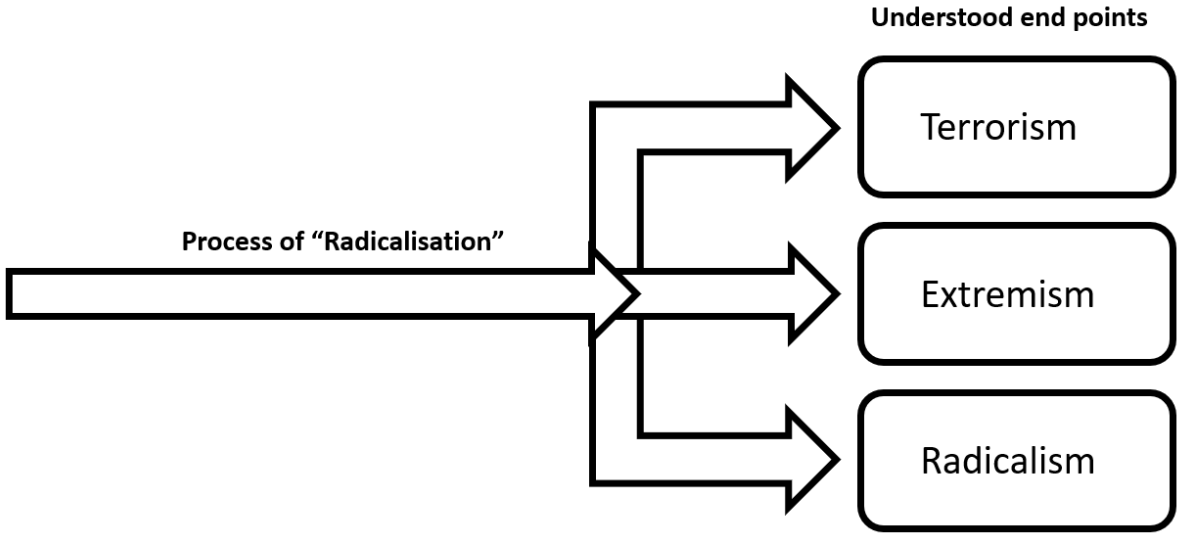

Figure 1 - Radicalisation as a Catch-all Word for Three Different Processes

Although scholars agree that radicalisation denotes a process, there is little consensus on what the process actually leads towards. The obvious semantic choice, radical or radicalism, is used sparingly (Schmid 2013; Bartlett and Miller 2012; Snow and Cross 2011; Borum 2011a). Many scholars will define it by the accumulation of extremist beliefs (Helfstein 2012; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008; Berger 2017; Powers 2014). This can be seen in practice too; the 2015 UK Prevent Strategy review defines radicalisation as 'the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and extremist ideologies associated with terrorist groups' (HM Home Office 2015, p.21). Similarly, Hunter and Heinke (2011) note that the FBI defines it as 'the process by which individuals come to believe their engagement in or facilitation of nonstate violence to achieve social and political change is necessary and justified' (Hunter and Heinke 2011). The majority, however, define it simply as a precursor to terrorism or political violence, often having previously adopted extreme beliefs (Klausen et al. 2016; Doosje et al. 2016; Silber and Bhatt 2007; Moghaddam 2005; Lygre et al. 2011; Leistedt 2016; Pettinger 2015; Vidino et al. 2017; Venhaus 2010; Webber and Kruglanski 2017). It is a fair characterisation, as Sedgwick explains, that the word '"radicalization" is for the most part, the term used to describe "what goes on before the bomb goes off"' (Sedgwick 2010). There is nothing inherently wrong with redefining terms to fit a new contextual purpose (this is a

[1] The word "jihadization" has been used in one widely-cited piece of research, but is not used in the bulk of the literature (Silber and Bhatt 2007).

pervasive function of language), however, in this instance, it has resulted in a lack of clarity over the meaning of the word.

2.2.2 Terrorism

To make matters more complicated, the three words most associated with radicalisation – terrorism, extremism, and radicalism – are fundamentally contested in themselves. It is not the author's intent to revisit the long debate on the definition of terrorism, but suffice to say:

> Academics, politicians, security experts and journalists all use a variety of definitions of terrorism. Some focus on the terrorist organizations' mode of operation. Others emphasize the motivations and characteristics of terrorism (Ganor 2002, p.290)

The wide berth of definitions tends to, as Schmid observes, fulfil the interests of the power holders in the domestic and international political systems who have "defining agency" (Schmid 2004). Schmidt is suggesting that because the powerful are able to define terrorism, they invariably use this definition to fulfil their political goals, particularly because it is normative, conjuring up emotive images. A central thesis of critical terrorism studies is that this is problematic because the terrorist actions of states are ignored because common definitions, usually created by states themselves, exclude them (Stohl 2008). This debate has largely resulted in a stalemate; there continues to be no universal definition of terrorism and different states have vastly different "designation lists" (Meserole and Byman 2019). Some scholars, like Ramsay (2015) have argued that it is better undefined because of the heterogeneity of contexts in which the word is used, suggesting it is a "hollow concept". In short, there are many that contest both the definition of the word and the normative manner in which it is deployed.

2.2.3 Extremism

Attempts to define extremism are equally difficult, as the UK Government's 2015 Prevent Guidelines show:

> Vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also include in our definition of extremism calls for the death of members of our armed forces, whether in this country or overseas (HM Home Office 2015, p.21)

The UK definition bears a stark contrast to some academic definitions, such as that of Berger: 'A spectrum of beliefs in which an in-group's success is inseparable from negative acts against an out-group. Negative acts can include verbal attacks and diminishment, discriminatory behaviour, or violence' (Berger 2017, p.6) or Schmid's definition: 'extremists strive to create a homogeneous society based on rigid, dogmatic ideological tenets; they seek to make society conformist by suppressing all opposition and subjugating minorities' (Schmid 2013, p.9).

It is clear that such definitions are fit for the purpose they serve; a lawmaker or practitioner may have little use for a definition that requires analysis of the interplay between an in-group and out-group, while the academic may deride the notion of "fundamental British values" as a political tool (Poole 2016). However, it is clear that, as for the definition of terrorism, there is no commonly accepted term of extremism. Much debate around the definition focuses on the difference between violent (which includes terrorism) and non-violent extremism, as Richards argues: 'if we are to engage with the concept of extremism…a clearer distinction needs to be made between extremism of (nonviolent) thought and extremism of method' (Richards 2015, p.376). The recently created UK Commission for Countering Extremism highlights the lack of consensus around the word and that it is prudent to treat violent extremism as separate to hateful extremism as the two require markedly different strategies (Commission for Countering Extremism 2019). This mirrors much of the debate regarding radicalisation; lending further weight to the notion that radicalisation has become a catch-all term for the process of extremism.

2.2.4 Radicalism

The less-used end-point, radicalism, is also unclear and contested. Although it is sometimes used more-or-less interchangeably with terrorism and extremism (Kruglanski et al. 2014; LaFree 2017; Hafez and Mullins 2015), it is also used when authors are making a point regarding the problematic nature of conflating those two words with radicalisation (Schmid 2013; Bartlett and Miller 2012; Borum 2011a). Bartlett (2017) describes radicals simply as those that advocate fundamental social or political reform, while Snow and Cross (2011) argue that sociological understandings of the term are often vague because radicals are often defined by their context. They offer the following definition: 'a social movement activist who embraces direct action and high-risk options, often including violence against others, to achieve a stated goal' (Snow and Cross 2011, p.118).

Schmid concurs with Snow and Cross's argument, noting that the 'content of the concept 'radical' has changed quite dramatically in little more than a century…[and] we must conclude…that 'radical' is a relative concept' (Schmid 2013). He suggests that it ought to be defined by two main elements:

1. Advocating sweeping political change, based on a conviction that the status quo is unacceptable while at the same time fundamentally different alternatives appears to be available to the radical;
2. The means advocated to bring about the system-transforming radical solution for government and society can be non-violent and democratic (through persuasion and reform) or violent and non-democratic (through coercion and revolution) (Schmid 2013, p.8)

Schmid distinguishes this from his aforementioned definition of extremism, suggesting that the two should be considered quite separate. Snow and Cross and Schmid both agree

that there is a high degree of relativism when the term is used in common parlance, before cementing that point by offering quite different definitions of the term (such as the necessary condition of risk taking and direct action).

It should be clear, even before analysing the word "radicalisation," that there is a lack of clarity due to the words that are associated and often used interchangeably with it. When one uses the term, it is unclear whether it is in relation to terrorism, extremism, or radicalism. This is important because, as Schuurman and Taylor (2018) argue, these are three distinct concepts which are not causally related. All three words are contested and ambiguous themselves, creating two tiers of confusion. Moreover, the three words all have different normative connotations which affect their understanding, which in turn affect the conceptual clarity of the word "radicalisation" itself; to refer to the radicalisation process of becoming a terrorist has clear negative connotations which are not shared if one is referring to the process of becoming a radical.

2.2.5 End Points: Beliefs versus Behaviour

The conceptual difference at the heart of this ambiguity is whether radicalisation is a cognitive or behavioural process. As noted above, there is an academic consensus that radicalisation represents a process, but little agreement on what the end of the process looks like. Neumann argues that research in the field of radicalisation studies is divided into two ends: a cognitive phenomenon in which actors adopt extreme *beliefs* or those who focus on extreme *behaviour* (Neumann 2013b). This relates to the confusion regarding interchangeable words. Those that research radicalisation as the route to terrorism are purporting a version of behavioural radicalisation, while those who use it interchangeably with extremism and radicalism are generally focusing on beliefs as the end result. Of course, many definitions of extremism suggest that such belief *may* result in political violence, like the above definition of Berger (2017). However, the point at which the radicalisation process is complete hinges on the change in belief, not behaviour. Conversely, behavioural radicals may well adopt extremist beliefs, but their process is not complete until it manifests in some kind of action.

2.2.6 Behaviour

The most commonly-held understanding of radicalisation, as noted above by the connection with the term terrorism, is in connection with committing violent acts. Of course, not *any* violent act will suffice; nobody discusses those convicted of homicide as having been radicalised. There must be an ideological element to the behaviour. A report by the New York Police Department defines radicalisation as: 'the progression of searching, finding, adopting, nurturing, and developing this extreme belief system to the point where it acts as a catalyst for a terrorist act' (Silber and Bhatt 2007, p. 16). It is not only the final act of terrorism, but that it is motivated by an extreme belief system. Similarly, Jenkins defines radicalisation as:

> The term "radical" applies to one who carries his theories or convictions to their furthest application. It implies not only extreme beliefs, but extreme action.

> Radicalization refers to the process of adopting for oneself or inculcating in others a commitment not only to a system of beliefs, but to their imposition on the rest of society (Jenkins, Forward to: Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman 2009, p.7)

Again, it is a necessary condition that the 'radical' has extreme beliefs, but not sufficient. On these readings, sufficiency can only obtain when these beliefs are put into action. This type of definition is common in widely-cited research (For example, see: McCauley and Moskalenko 2008; Helfstein 2012; Klausen et al. 2016).

There are many scholars who argue for a stricter demarcation between cognitive and behavioural radicalisation, suggesting that trying to identify and police beliefs is misguided and that the problematic element – behaviour – should be the primary focus. Richards notes that 'counterterrorism, rather than focusing on the threat from terrorism, has itself become increasingly ideological – it has gone beyond the remit of countering terrorism and has ventured into the broader realm of tackling ideological threats to the state' (Richards 2015, p.380). This point is also made by Borum, who argues that understanding radicalisation as developing beliefs as a precursor to terrorism is flawed, observing that 'most radicals did not (and do not) engage in terrorism, and many terrorists did not (and do not) "radicalize" in any traditional sense' (Borum 2011c, p.2). The fundamental point that both Richards and Borum are making is that 'conflating the two concepts undermines our ability to effectively counter either of them' (Borum 2011c, p.2). On this reading, it is clearly the case that ideology and beliefs play an important role in the route to violent extremism, but there are many other factors, including predisposing life experiences, activating situations, predisposing vulnerabilities, and social and group dynamics (Borum 2017). To avoid confusion with behavioural radicalisation, Borum suggests referring to this as an "action pathway" (Borum 2011c) – also called "terrorist pathways" by Horgan (2008) – although referring to it as "radicalisation" is still pervasive in the literature.

However, this dichotomy, according to Neumann (2013b), is a false one, suggesting that the detractors of cognitive radicalisation, such as Borum, have created a straw man:

> The notion of a 'unidirectional relationship' between beliefs and terrorism may exist in the minds of some right-wing bloggers, but it has never gained traction among members of the scholarly community. None of the widely used models and theories of radicalization suggest that beliefs or ideologies are the sole influence on or explanation for why people turn to terrorism (Neumann 2013b, pp.879-880).

Neumann accepts the fact that not all cognitive extremists become terrorists and that not all terrorists are extremists, but this causes Borum to assume that beliefs are overrated in understanding behavioural radicalization. Rather than beliefs being just "one of many" factors, Neumann argues that the behaviour of the IRA compared to the peaceful Tibetans, or the 'quietist' Salafists compared to Al-Qaeda 'can only be understood by looking at, among other factors, the different strands of their belief system and what they

say about the circumstances in which violence is permitted…Without reference to beliefs, none of these behaviours make any sense' (Neumann 2013b, p.880). He concludes that for academia to derive a better understanding of behavioural radicalisation, more, rather than less, effort should be spent attempting to understand beliefs. This position correctly identifies that the separation of beliefs from behaviour does not, as Borum suggests, offer a "clearer picture" into how individuals radicalise behaviourally. Instead, it restricts understanding of how beliefs may foster (or not foster) violent behaviour.

2.2.7 Beliefs

Scholars like Neumann (2013b) argue that it is not desirable to separate beliefs from behavioural radicalisation. However, it may be desirable to do the converse: separate behaviour from cognitive radicalisation – at least by way of an end result. Christmann (2012) argues that the growing synonymy between terrorism and radicalisation introduces a systemic bias towards 'that smaller cohort of individuals who, once radicalised, go on to commit acts of violence…[and] away from the radicalisation process that proceeds terrorism' (Christmann 2012, p.4). Christmann takes the view that radicalisation ought to be defined by the adoption of extreme beliefs and that focusing on terrorism and political violence neglects those who hold similar beliefs but choose not to act on them. The idea of a systematic bias can also be seen in Bartlett and Miller (2012), who compare a group of nonviolent radicals to assess the differences between them and those who do turn to violence. Of course, this method fuses definitions of both cognitive and behavioural radicalisation to some extent because it assesses them against each other, but to do so, one must first accept that behaviour as a necessary and sufficient condition for radicalisation is flawed.

However, there is a contention concerning the *type* of belief that is sufficient for cognitive radicalisation: extremist or radical. Radicalisation to extremism, at its most simple is "the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs'[2] (Borum 2011, p.9). The above quoted UK Prevent and FBI definitions of radicalisation focus on the *support* of violence and extremist ideologies (HM Home Office 2015; Hunter and Heinke 2011). Berger offers a different, and slightly more nuanced definition:

> The escalation of an in-group's extremist orientation through the endorsement of increasingly harmful actions against an out-group or out-groups (usually correlating to the adoption of increasingly negative views of the same) (Berger 2017, p.7)

All four definitions have two important things in common. Firstly, as noted above, they relate to beliefs rather than behaviour. Of course, such beliefs *may* be conducive to behaviour (notably violence), but the process of radicalisation is complete when beliefs change. Secondly, the beliefs themselves are deemed to be, either implicitly or explicitly, normatively bad – the use of the word "extremist" often manufactures this judgement,

[2] For Borum, as noted above, this is different to radicalisation to terrorism, for which he emphasises a strong demarcation. He calls this an 'action pathway'.

but also references to the support of violence or harmful actions. Clearly, when one refers to radicalisation in this context, it is condemning the development of unhealthy beliefs that may lead to harmful behaviour.

Not all researchers share this notion of normative radicalisation though. Some scholars use the term "radical" or "radicalism" to distinguish between radicalisation that leads to terrorism or extremism, by using a normative-neutral understanding of the term. Bartlett and Miller (2012), for example define it as:

> The process by which individuals are introduced to an overtly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate, mainstream beliefs towards extreme views. To be a radical is to reject the status quo, but not necessarily in a violent or even problematic manner (Bartlett and Miller 2012, p.2).

Schmid concurs with this notion, arguing that one must separate radicalism from extremism to 'keep the concept analytically useful and not just a political container term used by political players' (Schmid 2013, p.7). Rather, in many contexts, such as in America, 'the very idea of 'radicalism' has positive connotations…Radicals are an essential part of their national story' (Neumann 2013b, pp. 876-877). While radicalising to become an extremist is clearly understood as normatively bad, doing so to become a radical is anywhere on the spectrum of bad to neutral to good.

2.2.7 Combined Definitions

A final category of definition of radicalisation is one that incorporates both cognitive and behavioural elements. Schmid offers an example of this in his extensive "re-conceptualisation" of radicalisation, which is created from a literature review of existing definitions:

> An individual or collective (group) process whereby, usually in a situation of political polarisation, normal practices of dialogue, compromise and tolerance between political actors and groups with diverging interests are abandoned by one or both sides in a conflict dyad in favour of a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict-waging. These can include either (i) the use of (non-violent) pressure and coercion, (ii) various forms of political violence other than terrorism, or (iii) acts of violent extremism in the form of terrorism and war crimes. The process is, on the side of rebel factions, generally accompanied by an ideological socialization away from mainstream or status quo-oriented positions towards more radical or extreme positions involving a dichotomous world view and the acceptance of an alternative focal point of political mobilization outside the dominant political order as the existing system is no longer recognized as appropriate or legitimate. (Schmid 2013, p.18)

This conceptualisation relies on several contingencies (use of words such as "usually," "generally," and "can include"), which offer a more nuanced descriptive understanding,

but the lack of necessary conditions offers a poorer definitional understanding. The only part of this definition that *must* occur for radicalisation is the breakdown of dialogue, compromise, and tolerance between political actors and groups and a growing commitment for confrontational tactics. These conditions include both behavioural (the breakdown of dialogue and compromise) and cognitive (breakdown of tolerance and commitment for confrontation) aspects. This approach is similar to Fletcher's (2006) "family-likeness" approach to defining terrorism; he argues that terrorism is made up of eight different factors, but not all necessarily apply at the same time and, as such, consist of overlapping factors. While Schmid's definition seems to bridge the gap between the two understandings, it is difficult to see how this could be operationalised systematically for empirical research.

2.2.8 Operationalising a Radicalisation Definition

It should be clear that there is a substantial degree of conceptual ambiguity surrounding the definition of radicalisation. The term can be used to describe the three different processes which are not causally related (Schuurman and Taylor 2018). These processes denote one of two different end points – radical beliefs or radical behaviour. This is not a trivial distinction; one cannot necessarily discern if it means the process of becoming a terrorist, a non-violent extremist, or a radical who is trying to change the world for the better. Moreover, the normative and political nature of each of these understandings makes it even cloudier. Schmid (2013) argues that: 'With such heterogeneous definitions, it is hard to conclude otherwise that 'radicalisation' is a very problematic concept' (Schmid 2013 p.6). It is important for such concepts to be clear for the robustness of research:

> Flitting between different understandings of the abstract concept could result in some variables representing understanding X, other representing understanding Y and still other representing understanding Z. The result will be a flawed measurement of the abstract concept. (Macdonald and Whittaker 2019, p.34)

To simply use the word "radicalisation" without being sufficiently clear about the meaning runs the risk of conducting misleading research. Moreover, it affects the ability of others to synthesise this research for the purposes of meta-reviews as well as the ability of the research to convey their findings to interested parties such as policymakers and the media (Macdonald and Whittaker 2019).

Schuurman and Taylor (2018) argue that there is a "specificity gap" in the common understanding of radicalisation because it conflates adoption of extreme beliefs with extreme actions, while leaving other, equally important, factors unemphasised; they suggest the word "fanaticism" is a better framework for understanding the relationship between beliefs and actions. McCauley and Moskalenko (2017), who accept this misconception, disagree. They argue that, even if conceptually ambiguous, getting rid of words like "radicalisation" and "extremism" will not fix the problem because new names will appear to denote the same process. Instead, they argue that specificity is the answer,

following the lead of Borum (2011c), in separating trajectories towards violence (calling them "action pathways") and those to extremism. They are both right, specificity is clearly the answer to this ambiguity.

When describing the study of radicalisation in 2010, Githens-Mazer and Lambert were damning, arguing that it was a research topic 'plagued by assumption and intuition, unhappily dominated by 'conventional wisdom' rather than systematic scientific and empirically based research' (Githens-Mazer and Lambert 2010, p.889). As will be discussed below, the field is no longer in such a poor state, in large part because it has embraced specificity within research. For example, there are several studies which, using primary or secondary data, analyse discrete, identifiable behaviours as part of terrorists' trajectories (For example, see: Gill et al. 2017; Corner, Bouhana and Gill 2018; Klausen et al. 2018; Lafree et al. 2018; Schuurman et al. 2018). Furthermore, studies that seek to experimentally test factors identified above are specific in their hypotheses and findings as they relates to beliefs or behaviour (Canetti et al. 2013; Federico et al. 2013; Webber et al. 2018). Even though the word "radicalisation" is still pervasive within the field of research, it has adapted to a place that is no longer as Githens-Mazer and Lambert (2010) described it.

With all sides of the radicalisation end-point debate in mind, a working definition is required to empirically study this topic. This thesis will draw from the behavioural understanding of the concept: i.e. *the process of engaging in terrorism or violent extremist actions* (Horgan 2008; Borum 2011a; Klausen et al. 2016). Horgan and Borum suggests calling this a 'terrorist pathway' or 'action pathway' (respectively) to demarcate from radicalisation of beliefs. However, given that this research is attempting to better understand the process of "online radicalisation," it is better to define the concept under investigation and be clear about how it will be treated. It is worth noting that this does not suggest ideology is irrelevant – to become radicalised under this definition an individual must commit an ideological act (i.e. terrorism or violent extremism) – this will be further explained in Chapter 4. However, the change in ideology is not considered the end point of the process, as others have defined it (e.g. Berger 2017).

2.3 ***Online Radicalisation: Conceptual Ambiguity***

As well as the conceptual issues surrounding the deployment of the word "radicalisation," there are also a number of ambiguities in the phrase "online radicalisation." In their review of the literature on this topic Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai note that: 'As with the wider debate on radicalisation, there is little agreement on what constitutes online radicalisation and how, if at all, it happens' (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai 2017, p.17). Similarly, in conducting a review of news sources before their empirical study on UK-based terrorists, Gill et al. (2015) highlight that the term is frequently deployed to mean different things:

> One of the key problems is an abundance of conceptual problems. A wide-range of virtual behaviours is subsumed into the category of online radicalisation. A simple search of news articles from March 2015 shows that a range of behaviours from accessing information on overseas events via the Internet, to accessing extremist content and propaganda, to detailing attack plans in a blog post, have all been considered as online radicalisation (Gill et al. 2015, p. 5).

In essence, they are suggesting that displaying any number of online behaviours related to terrorism in the online domain is sufficient to be deemed "online radicalisation." They also note that although academics have tried to remedy this problem with more specificity, none have been successful in quantifying the regularity of the behaviours (Gill et al. 2015). Von Behr et al's (2013) study conducts a review of the available literature to discern five hypotheses of online radicalisation with which to test against their sample. This will be discussed in more detail below, but again, it suggests a number of behaviours which can be conceptualised as online radicalisation.

This problem is also identified by Macdonald and Whittaker (2019), who conduct a literature search for sources which research online radicalisation, finding that only 21% defined the phrase when using it. Pertinently, for those that did define it, the definition diverged from others in important ways which affect the judgement of whether individuals radicalised online or not (Macdonald and Whittaker 2019). For those that do not define the term, one can, at best, infer a definition or understanding. The process is often described as if it is some sort of replacement or alternative for offline radicalisation, Sageman draws a sharp distinction between the 'radicalized young men [that] were mobilized into terrorism by face-to-face interactions' (Sageman 2008a p.109) of the past from the then-modern form of radicalising on online fora. This seems to imply that to be radicalised online requires no interaction in the offline domain, or at least primacy in the online domain. This view is shared by other studies like the Anti-Defamation League (2014) as well as being one of the five hypotheses of the Von Behr et al (2013) study.

Other understandings take a notably different view. Bermingham et al. (2009) explicitly define the term as:

> A process whereby individuals, through their online interactions and exposure to various types of Internet content, come to view violence as a legitimate method of solving social and political conflicts (Bermingham et al. 2009, p.231)

In other words, they define the process by the effects drawn from online content, rather than being concerned with the domain in which an individual acted, either exclusively or primarily – this is seemingly shared in Neumann's (2013a) understanding of the term. In short, the majority of the time, no definition of the phrase is offered, and when there is, it can mean substantially different things.

To make matters more complicated, the phrase "self-radicalisation" is also often utilised in the literature. According to Macdonald and Whittaker (2019), who search for articles

relating to this term too, the phrase is both used in a conceptually ambiguous manner *and* it is sometimes used to mean a specific type of online radicalisation. They outline the differences in the term. Firstly, Von Behr et al. (2013) take the process to imply that a terrorist radicalises without any contact, physical or virtual, and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2011) for whom it merely precludes offline interactions. Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai (2017) also note this discrepancy in the literature: 'For some authors, so-called 'self-radicalisation' (or radicalisation in isolation from wider networks) and radicalisation over the Internet are one and the same' (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai 2017, p.26). Self-radicalisation is, as Conway (2012) asserts, a fatally flawed concept because it overlooks the social process of radicalisation:

> One does not radicalise oneself in cyberspace, anymore than one is radicalised by oneself in the 'real world'... The concept of the violent online radical milieu thus works to show that ideas such as 'self- radicalisation' and 'self-recruitment' are effectively redundant. (Conway 2012, p.13)

In other words, the view that online interactions – both peer-to-peer or the consumption of propaganda – are not inherently social activities just because they take place online is an incorrect conceptualisation.

In Macdonald and Whittaker's (2019) study they highlight three reasons for the importance of conceptual clarity: undertaking robust research; communicating research findings to interested audiences; and conducting meta-reviews. The latter reason is important for the following chapter's literature review: if a concept has several common understandings and is not defined, then synthesising results may not be possible. In an ideal world, it may be preferable to aggregate the results of studies which analyse online radicalisation; it is often claimed that such systematic reviews are the top of the "pyramid" of academic inquiry (For example, see: Golden and Bass 2013). However, the lack of a common definition or even common understanding makes this impossible. The findings below offer several conceptualisations of what constitutes online radicalisation. As such, the literature review in Chapter 3 will review the concept as each author offers it, regardless of whether it refers to a cognitive or behavioural process or radicalisation, or however the researcher conceptualises the necessary interactions in the online domain. Where possible, these distinctions will be made and presented, however, the conceptual ambiguities outlined above, particularly the lack of definition in most cases, would make synthesising results in a systematic manner unattainable.

2.4 Understanding Radicalisation

2.4.1 Models and Theories

Several scholars have attempted to "model" the radicalisation process by offering different stages or factors that cause a person to engage in political violence. One of the best-known examples of this is Moghaddam's "Staircase to Terrorism" (2005), in which he conceptualises a five-step progression with fewer people ascending to each stage. The

ground floor contains millions of people with perceptions of injustice, of which only a small number move to the second level who experience anger and injustice and identify an enemy. On the third level, actors begin to engage with the morality of terrorist organisations and start to see such violence as a justifiable strategy, while the fourth level sees actors recruited to violent organisations and adopting an "us against them" outlook. The fifth and final floor involves training and participation in the actual terrorist incident (Moghaddam 2005). Rather than a model to be empirically tested, he suggests the staircase is a framework to organise psychological knowledge. This is, however, critiqued by Lygre et al. (2011) who challenge the linear nature of the model, suggesting that their literature review 'did not produce any empirical evidence supporting the prescribed order of psychological mechanisms… [which] question[s] the validity of Moghaddam's linear stepwise model' (Lygre et al. 2011, p.614). They also did not find empirical support for the psychological theories in steps three or four and question the value in excluding his model from empirical testing because the field of terrorism studies 'is in need of empirically and methodologically strong research' (Lygre et al. 2011, p.613).

Borum (2003) also offers a linear model as a psychological pathway to becoming a terrorist. He correctly observes that there is no universally applicable method to track every, or even most, trajectories, but instead claims that there are four observable stages that are common in the process. Firstly, he observes that individuals or groups tend to identify a problem or undesirable condition; this could be economic, social, or religious. Secondly, the problem is framed as an injustice compared to other groups, suggesting that the agent or group is being treated particularly unfairly. Thirdly, the diagnosed problem is attributed as being the fault of a target group, and finally, that target group is deemed morally responsible for the problem – he simplifies this as "it's not right", "it's not fair", "it's your fault", "you're evil" (Borum 2003). According to Borum, identifying a group as "evil" helps to facilitate violence, as it is more justifiable when it is aimed at bad people and it dehumanises the target group. He suggests that the model may help to identify agents who are at different stages of the trajectory. Similarly to Moghaddam's (2005) model, the empirical evidence of these stages were challenged, interestingly, by Borum himself years later, who admitted that the concepts were drawn from anecdotal and unsystematic analyses (Borum 2011b).

Several other models also offer a sequential understanding of radicalisation. Silber and Bhatt (2007) create a four-stage model of Islamist radicalisation: "Pre-radicalisation" describes an individual's life (their pedigree, lifestyle, religion, social status, neighbourhood and education) directly before their radicalisation process. Secondly, "Self-identification", in which individuals begin to explore Salafi Islam and base their identity around it. It is suggested that individuals most vulnerable to this are experiencing some kind of life crisis, which could include economic, social, political or personal factors. Next comes "Indoctrination", in which individuals fully adopt a jihadi-Salafi ideology while often withdrawing from their mosque and politicising their new beliefs. The final stage "Jihadization" includes the self-designation of the actor(s) as "holy warriors" and the operationalisation of this by way of an attack (Silber and Bhatt 2007). This is

relatively similar to the model offered by Precht (2007), who maps out four stages from "Pre-radicalisation" to "Action". Importantly, the model *is* sequential, but individuals do not follow a perfectly linear progression; allowing for individuals to engage in feedback loops and perhaps (although not explicitly stated) skip steps. The model heavily emphasises the role of ideology, claiming it to be 'the bedrock and catalyst for radicalization. It defines the conflict, guides movements, identifies the issues, drives recruitment, and is the basis for action' (Silber and Bhatt 2007, p.16). Given the critique of overplaying the role of ideology offered by Borum (2011c) and (Horgan 2008), it seems that this almost certainly understates other important factors. Silber and Bhatt (2007) also posit a lack of integration as a reason for radicalisation in Europe, a claim which has since been tested and rejected by several scholars (Vidino et al. 2017; Christmann 2012; Reynolds and Hafez 2017).

Helfstein (2012) posits a four-stage process consisting of: "awareness", "interest", "acceptance", and "implementation", but highlights that 'the nature of progression through these different stages is not uniform, and therefore the patterns and effects of social ties vary as people build their experience of radicalism' (Helfstein 2012, p.7). He notes that although some may follow the phase in a linear manner, others will rely on feedback loops from previous stages and some will skip steps. He also observes that the different stages have barriers to entry of ascending difficulty until one reaches acceptance, which facilitates easier implementation (Helfstein 2012). He argues that radicalisation cannot be fully understood as either an ideological or a social phenomenon, but instead as a process which integrates the two. Stressing the importance of social networks is important, few would argue against this point, but much of the literature, including the three models identified above (Borum 2003; Moghaddam 2005; Silber and Bhatt 2007) frame the process primarily as a personal one, potentially overlooking the importance of social interactions.

Despite models like the ones above being posited within the literature, there is little explained reason, for the most part, to believe that those radicalising actually go through a linear process. Borum (2011b) notes that despite these types of models becoming popular with law enforcement, the accuracy and stability of these models has not been tested. Similarly, in their review of five conceptual models, including three offered above, King and Taylor (2011) argue that multi-stage models are practically impossible to test empirically because confirming that each individual goes through the requisite stages is too-high of an evidentiary bar. They suggest that the best that can be hoped for is to test stages individually. One might therefore question the benefit of these models. Both Borum (2003) and Moghaddam (2005) claim that their models are not meant to be empirically tested, but rather as heuristics for social science theories, but given the objections to the evidence-base of these theories, as outlined above, this seems dubious. Recently, there has been some work developing the model created by Silber and Bhatt (2007) into a "dynamic risk assessment" of radicalisation trajectories (Klausen et al. 2016; Klausen 2016a; Klausen et al. 2018), although they admit they have to modify the original model by downplaying the role of ideology, which Silber and Bhatt (2007) claim

drive the process (Klausen et al. 2016). However, their focus specifically on sequencing behaviours related to four discrete stages suggests that Silber and Bhatt's model may have some value as an empirical basis.

Rather than trying to plot a multi-stage process, other scholars have taken a different approach, offering factors that are present in the process. McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) offer twelve mechanisms which tend to be present within the radicalisation process,[3] offering several different theories from social science to support each mechanism, although they do not propose an underlying theory uniting all twelve together. Individually, none of the mechanisms can explain how the process works:

> It is unlikely that any one of these mechanisms is sufficient to explain political radicalization…The list of twelve mechanisms are neither sufficient causes one by one nor instantiations of some larger theory. Rather, we suggest that there are multiple and diverse pathways leading individuals and groups to radicalization and terrorism. (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008, p.429)

It is also important to note that only two of the twelve mechanisms occur at the personal level, while the rest require a degree of social interaction. More recently, they have updated their model to separate between different processes of radicalisation towards violence and cognitive radicalisation (McCauley and Moskalenko 2017). They acknowledge the importance of the distinction between the two, as argued by Horgan (2008) and Borum (2011c) above, and conclude that 'There is no "conveyor belt" from extreme beliefs to extreme action. It is plausible that radical beliefs inspire radical action, but research has indicated that the connection is weak' (McCauley and Moskalenko 2017, p.213).

A similar strategy is taken by Webber and Kruglanski (2017) who offer a psychological "3 N's" model of radicalisation. They build on the theory that those that radicalise all share a "quest for significance", which Kruglanksi and others have posited elsewhere (For example, see: Dugas and Kruglanski 2014; Kruglanski et al. 2014; Jasko, LaFree and Kruglanski, 2017; Webber et al. 2018). Their model suggests that all radicalising individuals have "needs" of two types: individual and social. All the motivations that pertain from this – such as honour, humiliation, injustice, vengeance, and social status – can be conceived as part of a quest for significance (Webber and Kruglanski 2017). They also highlight the importance of "narratives", in other words ideology; one must identify a grievance and an out-group. Furthermore, these narratives often present the notion of opting to engage in violence for the cause as a means to gain significance. Finally, individuals enter into "networks" in which they find a second family and begin to intertwine personal views with the groups' collective views. As with McCauley and

[3] 1) Perceived personal victimisation, 2) Political grievance, 3) Joining a radical group (the slippery slope), 4) Joining a radical group (the power of love), 5) Extremity shift in like-minded groups, 6) Extreme cohesion under isolation and threat, 7) Competition for same base of support, 8) Competition with state power, 9) Within-group competition, 10) Jujitsu Politics, 11) Hate, 12) Martrydom.

Moskalenko (2008), there is no requirement for a specific sequence of these factors, nor do they insist that each must necessarily be present.

Bouhana (2019) also offers a non-linear model as a framework for radicalisation. Drawing from Situational Action Theory, which seeks to understand the interactions between people and their environment and how the latter may encourage involvement in crime (Wikström and Bouhana 2017). Bouhana's (2019) model includes with individual susceptibility – i.e. what characteristics an individual that may predispose them to becoming radicalised. This can be exacerbated by the individual's exposure to certain people, locations, or ideas; she demarcates "social selection," such as residence and socioeconomic status, from "self-selection," where individuals choose to spend their time. This is in turn affected by the different affordances that the settings offer individuals, such as whether certain settings encourage extremism or whether they fail to discourage social or legal norms. One level up from these settings is the social ecology – the communities that may support the emergence or maintenance of these affordances. Finally, the model includes the system-level factors, such as social norms, governance, and strains. These system level factors play a role in the emergence of social ecologies but also affect the susceptibility of individuals.

There have also been several theoretical contributions to explain the process of radicalisation. For example, Borum (2014) lists several unfulfilled needs that can lead to a "psychological climate" for radicalisation including pro-violent attitudes, grievances, sensation seeking, and disinhibition. Sageman (2004) posits the role of brotherhood and kinship as important in his "bunch of guys" theory, while Veldhuis and Staun (2009) emphasise the importance of frustration. Furthermore, in his literature review on the topic, Borum (2011a) lists a number of theories which have been posited as lenses to view the radicalisation process, including: Social movement theory, groupthink, in versus out-group dynamics, extremity shifts, and conversion theory. The role of stress has also been highlighted as a potential factor (Canetti et al. 2013), as have uncertainty (Hogg et al. 2013; Hogg and Adelman 2013; Pruyt and Kwakkel 2014), the quest for significance (Dugas and Kruglanski 2014; Kruglanski et al. 2014; Jasko, LaFree and Kruglanski 2017; Webber et al. 2018), and mortality salience (Pyszczynski et al. 2006).

2.4.2 A Complex Phenomenon

The non-linear models outlined above underlie the complexity of the radicalisation process. Rather than trying to identify discrete stages which actors go through, they posit factors which may be present. This seems like a fuller understanding of the process. Borum (2017) notes that the most striking feature of radicalisation is its diversity from case-to-case and trying to accurately discern and model it may not be a fruitful exercise, particularly given that we still know so little:

> While much about radicalization remains empirically unvalidated, it is clear that the process is multi-determined, and that its etiology often includes broad grievances that "push" an individual toward a radical ideology and the narrower,

> more specific "pull" factors that attract them. Many times, the factors are transactive (affecting each other). (Borum 2017, p.28)

Other scholars have also argued that the process is too complex to substantiate in a simple model or theory (Silva 2018; Guhl 2018; Hafez and Mullins 2015). Jensen, Atwell Seate and James (2018) note that research on radicalisation has been ontologically and methodologically flawed:

> Research on extremism continues to treat the phenomenon as one that can be understood through the development of simple linear process models or through the identification of small sets of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral traits that are believed to be common to extremists. Research shows that these models struggle to account for the radicalization trajectories of many extremists while also contributing to the proliferation of misleading radicalization profiles (Jensen, Atwell Seate and James 2018, p.2).

That is to say, they miss a number of true negatives of those that engage in violence but do not 'radicalize" in any traditional sense' (Borum 2011c, p.2). Conversely, they also do not seem adept at explaining false positives; individuals that go through all the stages (or fulfil the criteria) but do not engage in violent behaviours.

Similarly, despite the range of theoretical contributions to the field, there remain more questions than answers. Few have been empirically tested and even fewer have been tested rigorously to support the hypothesis of engagement in violence. Jensen, Atwell Seate, and James (2018) note that:

> Radicalization research has not focused on the rigorous empirical testing of key theoretical propositions, making it difficult to judge how well the theories work as general explanations of radicalization processes. Instead, most theories are supported by limited case evidence and many researchers do not reference case selection criteria or the logic of inference that is being employed in their studies. (Jensen, Atwell Seate, and James 2018, p.2)

In his review of theories to explain radicalisation, Borum (2011a) notes that: 'None of the theories discussed here provides easy answers. No single theory is likely to explain all violent radicalizations' (Borum 2011a, p.31). Given the lack of consensus both at the empirical and theoretical level, it is unsurprising that scholars have started to assess factors from a "multifinality" perspective (Corner, Bouhana and Gill 2018)

2.4.3 Empirical Radicalisation Research – What we know

This is not to say that there are no insights into the dynamics or processes of radicalisation, merely that there are not presently theories which can explain a cause-and-effect process. Typically, studies have tended to demonstrate that there is a lack of commonality between radicalised individuals. Vidino, Marone and Entenmann (2017) note that their sample of terrorist attackers is heterogeneous demographically, while

Bakker (2006) notes that his sample has more dissimilarities than similarities. Silber and Bhatt (2007) note that there is no useful profile that can be used, which Horgan (2008) agrees with, noting that attempts at creating a terrorist profile have repeatedly failed. Corner, Bouhana and Gill (2018) note that in the literature the following factors and indicators have been associated with radicalisation: poor integration, poverty, relative deprivation, the Internet, social interactions, prisons, mental disorders, and personality characteristics. Gill (2016) notes that the large number of variables that posit a relationship with radicalisation is problematic for future research because they lack weighting and indicators are not all equal; he argues that this has led to 'the radicalisation literature lack[ing] specificity in terms of what it is studying the indicators of' (Gill 2016, p.7).

Despite there being no suitable terrorist profile, research has suggested some general demographic trends. Several database studies have found that over 95% are male (Horgan et al. 2016; Bakker 2006; Sageman 2004; Gill et al. 2015; Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann 2017), although research into ISIS foreign fighters has been slightly more even, with around 80-85% being male (Cook and Vale 2019; Reynolds and Hafez 2017). Moreover, terrorists tend to be young. In their study on UK terrorists, Gill et al. (2017) find a median age of 27; a mean of 28; and a mode of 22, although this exists between a range of 16-58. Other studies have come to similar conclusions: Both Sageman's (2004) Reynolds and Hafez's (2017) respective samples have a mean age of around 26, while Bakker's (2006) and Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann's (2017) are 27.

Socioeconomic factors are often posited as a potential cause or stressor in radicalisation, although there is little consensus within the academic literature. Sageman (2004) found that in his terrorism database, underemployment played an important role, but Bakker's (2006) sample challenges this, finding there to be no typical similarities within samples. Other database studies have found between a third (Gill et al. 2015) and 12% (Horgan et al. 2016) to be unemployed. In their sample of German foreign fighters, Reynolds and Hafez (2017) find socioeconomic integration to be a poor predictor of individuals choosing to travel, while LaFree et al. (2018) find that around 70% of their US based sample of terrorists to have a stable employment history. At the macro level, Piazza (2006) finds that poorer countries *do not* produce more international terrorists, but does find that minority economic discrimination is a strong predictor of domestic terrorism (Piazza 2011). Cruz and colleagues (2013) find that labour force participation (i.e. the active workforce) is negatively correlated with the frequency with which a country experiences acts of terrorism. There is a longstanding academic study of these factors, which Schmid summarises as: 'The fact is that empirical research has not been able to establish a direct link between collective or individual poverty and terrorism. In other words, this is a myth or at best a half-truth' (Schmid 2013, p.25). He does, however, suggest that this may not hold over all countries and that certain economic measurements, such as underemployment may play a role.

The role of education in radicalisation has also been contested in the academic literature. In some empirical research, terrorist samples have been found to be relatively well educated, with the large majorities having completed secondary education (Bakker 2006; Sageman 2004), and sizable minorities having tertiary qualifications (Horgan et al. 2016; Gill et al. 2015; Bakker 2006; Sageman 2004). In some instances, terrorist populations have been found to demonstrate a higher level of education than the general population from which they come (Berrebi 2007). In their study of US-based terrorists, LaFree et al. (2018) test the hypothesis that an increase in educational attainment will decrease the probability of engaging violence. Bivariate analysis which compares extremists that commit violence against those that do not supports this hypothesis, although conducting a multivariate analysis, they find that it had no significant predictive effect when controlling for other behaviours.

Research has pointed towards a clustering of radical individuals or networks, which experience larger mobilisation or recruitment than one may otherwise expect. These are sometimes called radicalisation "hotspots" or "hotbeds." In their study of IS terrorists in the West, Vidino et al. (2017) note that actors are distributed unevenly, even if accounting for factors such as integration. They posit that a concentration of a small number of charismatic leaders play a key role in a bottom-up network of peers. This point is also made in relation to foreign fighters by the Soufan Group (2015), who suggest that this is a key determinant to mobilisation to Iraq and Syria. Several hotspots have been identified in the academic literature such as Molenbeek in Belgium (Van Vlierden 2016) Derna and Sirte in Libya (Varvelli 2016) and Minneapolis/St Paul in the US (Vidino, Harrison, and Spada 2016). In their sample of 99 German foreign fighters, Reynolds and Hafez (2017) find support for the hypothesis that such clustered networks were the most important factor in mobilisation. This is in line with the theoretical arguments of Bouhana (2019), who notes that extremism-enabling settings are not equally distributed in space and time; some environments contain specific contexts which encourage – or fail to suppress – extremist behaviours.

Another factor is the potential over-representation of converts in jihadist terrorism. Several scholars have observed that there appear to be many more within contemporary cohorts than in previous decades (Klausen 2016b; Sedgwick 2010). Azani and Koblentz-Stenzler (2019) find that European Muslim converts are over-represented in radical jihadism. Taking the United Kingdom as an example, they observe that converts make up less than 4% of the Muslim population, but constitute 12% of the radiacl jihadist population. Fodeman et al. (2020) empirically test if this may be the case by surveying 356 American Muslims, half of whom are converts, and comapre the two groups. They find that the convert group exhibits higher activism and radicalism than the control group suggesting that they may be more likely to engage in violent behaviour such as terrorism. Halverson and Way (2012) argue that it is related to the "mystique" of Islam offering disaffected and criminally predisposed individuals a new start in life, while Hafez and Mullins (2015) state the promise of an afterlife is attractive to individuals who have a

background in crime, and these individuals may be knowledge-hungry and restless when presented with a new meaning in life.

Radicalisation research has also focused on the previous criminal experiences of terrorists. Basra and Neumann (2016) describe the dynamics of what they call the "crime-terror nexus" by drawing from a database of 79 European jihadists. They find that criminal and terrorist groups often recruit from the same population and that the personal needs and desires of criminals are similar to those of terrorists. Overall, they find that 57% of their database had been previously incarcerated, often for petty or violent crimes rather than ideologically motivated ones. The database studies of Horgan et al. (2016) and Vidino et al. (2017), have similar results, finding that 61% and 57% of their respective samples had criminal histories. The number is slightly lower in the research of Sageman (2004) and Bakker (2006) found that roughly a quarter of their respective samples had criminal records, but that those without a record had often been involved in activities without apprehension. Noting that criminologists regard having a criminal record as being one of the best predictors of future criminal behaviour, LaFree and colleagues (2018) hypothesise that individuals with a record will be more likely to engage in violent extremism, for which they find support, regardless of whether the previous activity was violent or not. Their finding also holds in multivariate analyses when controlling for other factors. Conducting a meta-review of risk indicators of radicalisation, Desmarais et al. (2017) find that find there to be some support for the relationship between previous criminal activity and engaging in terrorism, but note that offending ranges varied substantially, but problematically, studies rarely employ a control group.

The role of mental health disorders and involvement in terrorism has been hotly debated in academic scholarship for several decades. Gill and Corner (2017) observe four paradigms in this research, the first suggesting psychopathy was a cause of terrorist involvement, the second focused on personality types, the third synthesised the previous evidence and critiqued the body of knowledge, while the fourth, focused on empiricism outlines the range of pathways and different push and pull factors that may reinforce radicalisation. Scholars have often noted that terrorists do not suffer abnormal levels of mental health issues (Horgan 2008; Borum 2014; Venhaus 2010; Webber and Kruglanski 2018), although with the caveat that lone actor terrorists may have a higher disposition to specific disorders (Corner, Gill and Mason 2016). LaFree et al. (2017) hypothesise and find evidence that actors that display mental illness predicts engaging in political violence. Vidino and colleagues note that their cohort of terrorists, 'metal issues appear to have played a role in the actions of perpetrators of attacks' (Vidino et al., p.69). Neither of these studies disaggregated into specific disorders. Conducting a review of the empirical literature on psychopathology and terrorism, Corner and Gill (2018) outline a number of studies which do find a relationship between disorders and involvement in terrorism, but note caution against assuming causality – active symptoms may be present, but unrelated to engaging in violence.

2.5 Conclusion

One cannot undertake research into online radicalisation without first examining the word "radicalisation". Within the academic literature, it is definitionally unclear, referring to a process of one of three non-causally related phenomena: terrorism, extremism, and radicalism. At the heart of this ambiguity is a disagreement over whether the process is cognitive (i.e. leading to the adoption of a set of radical or extreme beliefs) or behavioural – i.e. leading to the adoption of a set of (sometimes violent) behaviours, often including the adoption of beliefs along the way. Moreover, each of the stem words have normative connotations which add further inconsistencies. Terrorism and extremism are deemed to be normatively bad, but are contested because policymakers have "defining agency" to use the words politically. Radicalism, on the other hand, can range anywhere from synonymy with the word terrorism, to a normatively good quality in which someone attempts to change the world for the better. This, too, can add to the ambiguity of the word. This ambiguity compounds with other factors to cloud what is meant by "online radicalisation," leaving both scholars and interested audiences unclear as to what the process entails.

This conceptual ambiguity has negatively impacted our understanding of how the process actually works. Various attempts have been made to conceptually model or theorise the process, either by positing a multi-stage trajectory or by highlighting mechanisms that take place. However, these tend to exist only at a theoretical stage, with little scope for empirical testing. There is a growing empirical literature on the different factors that are present in radicalised individuals, and although no common pathway exists, some characteristics or life experiences are more prevalent than others. Although there are dozens of risk factors and vulnerabilities, none are necessary or sufficient.