BETTINA ROTTWEILER & PAUL GILL

RISK FACTORS FOR VIOLENT EXTREMIST BELIEFS AND PARALLEL PROBLEM AREAS

Does a strong conspiracy mentality lead to violent extremist intentions? Bettina Rottweiler and Paul Gill suggest it depends on the individual's self-control, law-related morality, and self-efficacy.

The growing evidence base for risk factors for violent extremism demonstrates many overlaps with parallel problem areas like domestic violence, mass murder, stalking, and threats to public figures. Increasingly, we are also witnessing a seeming convergence between belief in conspiracy theories and ideological extremes. This is most clearly evidenced by recent right-wing terrorist attacks in Hanau, Halle, Christchurch, El Paso, Pittsburgh and Poway. Each perpetrator's manifesto referenced conspiracies such as the great replacement theory or white genocide.

Belief in extreme ideologies and conspiracy theories are thought to be rooted in similar underlying psychology. Conspiracy theories and extremist ideologies are both fundamentally rooted in sense-making processes that aim to structure the world in a clear-cut manner and intend to reduce feelings of uncertainty amongst adherents. Both offer prescriptive and action-relevant guidance, with clearly defined values and morals.

Research in these two areas however largely remains siloed. Consequently, there is a dearth of empirical research on the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and violent extremism. In a German nationally representative phone survey (N = 1502), we sought to investigate the relationship in detail .

We asked each participant about the degree to which they agreed with:

1. Five generic themes that re-occur in different conspiracy theories (e.g. secret organisations greatly influence political decisions).
2. The scenarios under which they would be willing to engage in illegal and violent actions on behalf of a group they identify with.

In the German sample, almost 32% of respondents showed conspiracy beliefs and 8% held self-reported violent extremist intentions.

> **"When stronger conspiracy beliefs are held in combination with high self-control and a strong law-relevant morality, violent extremist intentions are lower."**

[As an aside, we asked the same questions in the U.K. in summer 2020, and 37% reported a conspiracy mentality and 12% demonstrated violent extremist intentions].

A structural equation model of German survey data confirm that a stronger conspiracy mentality leads to increased violent extremist intentions. However, moderator analyses demonstrated this relationship is contingent on several individual differences. The effects are much stronger for individuals exhibiting lower self-control, holding weaker law-related morality, and scoring higher in self-efficacy. Conversely, when stronger conspiracy beliefs are held in combination with high self-control and a strong law-relevant morality, violent extremist intentions are lower.

WHY IS THIS INTERESTING?

High self-efficacy isn't always positive

Self-efficacy is typically associated with positive outcomes, and prosocial intentions and behaviours. Here, we find the opposite. Individuals scoring highly in both conspiracy beliefs and self-efficacy may feel more capable of taking violent action to redress grievances. This is important for CVE interventions

Image credit | JessicaGirvan / Shutterstock.com

that solely focus on self-efficacy in order to make individuals more resilient to violent extremism. Such interventions need to simultaneously tackle underlying grievances as otherwise individuals might use their newly gained self-efficacy beliefs to act upon those strains.

High self-control and high law-related morality mitigates risk

For individuals with a high conspiracy mentality, both low self-control and low law-related morality present a risk factor for violent extremism. But the inverse is also true. High self-control and high law-related morality mitigate the movement toward violent extremist intentions, even when high conspiracy beliefs are present. This has major implications for how we think about protective factors. Both high self-control and high law-related morality can be defined as 'interactive' or 'buffering' protective factors that provide insurance when a risk factor (in this case conspiratorial beliefs) is present.

There is no silver bullet

Multiple factors contribute to a single individual's pathway into violent extremism. No single risk factor can explain its genesis. There is no silver bullet. Risk assessments, and the management strategies derived from them, must take account of the constellation of multiple factors that interact with (and sometimes enable or disable one another) rather than solely focusing upon single risk factors. This is a more subtle and nuanced art than numbers-driven actuarial approaches can currently achieve.

Multiple policies needed to encourage prevention

Preventing individuals with high conspiracy beliefs from becoming violently radicalised may necessitate tailored, rather than broadly generalised policies. If multiple trajectories into violent extremism exist, there should be multiple policies to encourage prevention. Not all policies will have relevance to all individuals presenting with similar conspiracy mentalities, as their constellation of other risk and protective factors likely differs.

Bettina Rottweiler is a Research Assistant and final-year PhD student in the Department of Security and Crime Science at University College London. Her PhD analyses risk and protective factors for violent extremist intentions using general population surveys.

Professor Paul Gill is a Professor of Security and Crime Science at University College London. His research examines the behavioural underpinnings of terrorism and terrorist attacks.