EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Trauma, Adversity, And Violent Extremism

James Lewis and Sarah Marsden

INTRODUCTION

Research on violent extremism has found that individual processes of radicalisation are driven by a complex intersection of 'push' and 'pull' factors (Lewis & Marsden, 2021). In recent years, researchers have started to explore whether insights from the academic literature on trauma might advance our understanding of how these factors contribute to radicalisation. This research includes empirical studies into radicalisation pathways that have used trauma-informed frameworks (e.g. Windisch et al., 2020), as well as theoretical studies identifying potential synergies between these literatures (e.g. Koehler, 2020). This is a promising development within research on violent extremism but is a field of inquiry still in its infancy.

It is not yet possible to draw definitive conclusions on how research on trauma might be best utilised in work on violent extremism, or the specific ways in which trauma-informed frameworks might inform research and practice in this space. This report explores the potential utility of developing this research agenda further by identifying synergies between research on trauma and violent extremism, and by discussing the implications that these synergies might have for researchers and practitioners.

This report takes a broader approach than previous analyses by exploring how research on the *direct* and *indirect* effects of trauma might advance our understanding of radicalisation. Existing studies into the relationship between trauma and violent extremism have primarily focused on the former, including examining how direct exposure to personal traumas, such as adverse

childhood experiences (ACEs), or collectively traumatic events such as war, might contribute to radicalisation (e.g. Windisch et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2015a). These studies are in line with an established body of evidence that has shown that personal experiences of trauma can lead to maladaptive psychological and behavioural outcomes (Felitti et al., 1998).

There is also robust evidence to suggest that negative psychological and behavioural outcomes can be transmitted across generations and that individuals who are exposed to the lasting effects of historical traumas experienced by their ancestors are more likely to develop trauma symptomology than their peers (Lambert et al., 2014). However, researchers have yet to explore the applicability of this research to work on violent extremism. To advance this research agenda, this report explores research on the direct effects of personal and collective trauma, as well as the indirect effects of historical and intergenerational trauma, and discusses how knowledge about these causal pathways might be utilised in research on radicalisation.

KEY POINTS

There is obvious utility in continuing to explore the relationship between trauma and violent extremism, and the practical implications of applying a trauma lens to work in this space. There are promising synergies between research into the psychological and behavioural effects of different forms of trauma and recent empirical research into the causal pathways that underpin the radicalisation process (see Lewis & Marsden, 2021). Countering violent extremism interventions also appear to be increasingly aligned with, and in some cases directly informed by, the principles of trauma-focused and trauma-informed interventions.

The most direct synergy between the two literatures is research exploring the behavioural and psychological impacts of ACEs. The evidence base linking ACEs to involvement in violent extremism remains limited, but preliminary conclusions can be drawn:

- A small number of empirical studies into individual engagement in violent extremism have identified personal experiences of trauma (including ACEs) as a potential push factor for radicalisation. However, the relative importance of trauma as a driver remains unclear given that most people who experience trauma do not become radicalised.
- The broader literature on ACEs has been better able to identify causal pathways between trauma and maladaptive psychological and behavioural outcomes than the literature on radicalisation, and so further exploration of this evidence would be useful.

There are promising synergies between research on the social ecology of radicalisation and on intergenerational, historical, and collective trauma.

- Research has found that the psychological and behavioural impacts of trauma on the *individual* are often rooted in historical and/or contemporary *collective* experiences.
- This aligns with research that finds that *individual* participation in violent extremism is often rooted in lived or perceived *collective* experience, and is often framed by narratives that draw heavily on these events. Notably, many of the collective experiences identified in work on radicalisation (such as lived or perceived experiences of discrimination; structural or societal inequalities; or the holding of political grievances) have been analysed through a trauma lens within the literature on trauma.
- More work is needed to understand how existing analyses of collective experiences across both literatures relate to each other, and whether a trauma-informed approach would help to illuminate how collective experience shapes individual terrorist action.

Recent developments in trauma-informed care align with contemporary research into the social ecology of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) interventions:

- Trauma-informed interventions recognise that individual responses to circumstances are not simply driven by the biophysical characteristics of the individual, but how these characteristics intersect with social, environmental and ecological factors. Interventions seek to identify those micro, meso, and macro-level factors which help to explain what happened to the individual (i.e. why they were exposed to a specific experience) and why that experience came to have specific psychological and behavioural impacts so that they can address the causes and consequences of trauma.
- Multi-dimensional trauma-informed interventions map closely onto multi-agency P/CVE interventions such as the UK's Channel programme. However, trauma-informed approaches more explicitly identify potential causal factors operating at different levels of an individual's social ecology and design appropriate support to tackle each one in turn.

- The trauma-informed approach may provide a foundation for delivering P/CVE interventions targeted at the individual level that more explicitly attend to the social and ecological factors that contribute to engagement in, and inhibit disengagement from, violent extremism. However, more research into the practical implications and benefits of utilising this approach in P/CVE work is needed.

Trauma-informed frameworks could potentially be used to embed procedural justice into P/CVE interventions. The principles of trauma-informed care map closely onto the principles of 'procedural justice', which is crucial to ensuring that the public trusts and is willing to co-operate with the counter-terrorism system (Lewis & Marsden, 2021). Further research into the synergies between these frameworks, and the subsequent implications for P/CVE, may therefore be useful.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

At this stage, it is not possible to make a definitive judgement on how the research on trauma might be best utilised in work on violent extremism. Further research will be needed to explore the preliminary synergies between the two literatures presented in this report. To guide this effort, the authors have identified several questions to inform further discussion about the potential benefits of bringing these two bodies of work into closer dialogue. These include questions to inform future research into radicalisation pathways, and research that might inform the development and delivery of trauma-informed and trauma-focused P/CVE interventions:

1. Evidence for the causal pathways linking ACEs with maladaptive outcomes is more robust than existing evidence on radicalisation pathways. How could research on ACEs be used to better understand the radicalisation process?

2. The work on ACEs draws attention to how involvement in harmful or illegal activities can be considered an adaptive response to living in challenging contexts and being subject to difficult experiences. How might this understanding be translated into research and practice on violent extremism?

3. Increasingly, research on trauma is taking a multi-systemic approach to interpreting how and why people become involved in harmful activities by taking account of the multiple, interacting factors which operate across levels of analysis and which cluster together in particular social settings. What might a comparable multi-systemic approach to violent extremism be able to learn from this literature?

4. How well do biopsychosocial models of trauma, and resilience to trauma, map onto socio-ecological models of radicalisation? Could these models help to better understand how social, environmental, and individual factors coalesce to drive radicalisation, and in turn inform the design of socio-ecological-informed interventions?

5. Research on trauma offers a broader framework for understanding the medium to long-term causal processes that might inform maladaptive behaviour. What insights might be possible in research on violent extremism by shifting attention from the question of what risk and protective factors are present/absent to asking why those who become involved in violent extremism might embody or come to manifest those factors?

6. What are the implications of research on collective mass trauma, including exposure to political violence, for efforts to facilitate the disengagement and reintegration of returning foreign terrorist fighters? What lessons can be drawn from trauma-informed interventions developed for refugees and asylum seekers fleeing violence?

7. By trying to interpret how life choices and chances are informed by cultural and historical events, such as experiences of discrimination or repression, research

on intergenerational and historical trauma centres the role of politics in research on what shapes behaviour. Given the increasing focus on often apolitical, individual-level risk factors, such as low self-control, or mental health problems in radicalisation research, what might be gained by looking more broadly at how political events are experienced, perceived and transmitted at the social and cultural level? How might this approach help interpret why extremist ideologies take hold in particular settings?

8. Looking at intergenerational processes foregrounds the importance of time. What insights might be possible by asking how involvement in violent extremism is informed by interactions between biophysical, micro, meso, exo, macro *and* chronosystems?

9. What insights from the literature on trauma might help inform interventions that are: better equipped to recognise the sometimes-adaptive nature of involvement in violent extremism; designed to address the clusters of factors that characterise challenging social contexts; take a trauma-informed approach to acknowledging the local and global histories that can inform harmful behaviour; and recognise the explicitly political and ideological features of these dynamics?

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This summarises the key findings from the full report which can be found here: *https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/trauma-adversity-and-violent-extremism/*

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