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# UNDERSTANDING ENGAGEMENT IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Professor Neil Ferguson draws on his work in Northern Ireland with former Loyalist and Republican combatants, to look at factors which occur regularly in accounts of engagement in violent extremism

Whenever we experience a terror attack, our initial response is to think how could someone do that? What would drive a person to kill others for political or ideological gain? Unfortunately the answers to these questions are not simple, and psychologists have struggled to derive adequate answers for decades.

The main problem lies with the dynamic and multifaceted range of factors involved in the transformation from civilian to violent extremist. Individual factors, community and societal context, and global ideological forces all have an influence. However, evidenced-based research is beginning to unearth some consistent findings and produce some useful insights.

The most common factor held prior to engagement in violent extremism is that of having a sense of being a member of a community which has been collectively victimised or unjustly treated. This condition is key to setting the contextual environment for radicalisation towards violent extremism to begin to be possible. This is clearly illustrated in the accounts of many of the former Republican paramilitaries I have interviewed. They spoke about how witnessing the brutality of the British Army or the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) were key drivers for them to seek recruitment into the Irish Republican Army (IRA). These feelings of victimisation usually lead to a desire for

revenge that drives initial engagement. Indeed, an individual's initial violence, while seemingly ideological or politically driven, may be no more than a reaction to events or perceived injustices experienced by the individual or their wider community.

It also important to note that the reaction to this injustice is not a simple Pavlovian stimulus. Rather, the incident can create a state of dissociation that forces an individual to consider their future, and make a conscious decision to pursue violence or join an armed group. Many of our interviewees who took action, reported periods of reflection after these victimising experiences during which they consciously considered how they would act to change the status quo, or hit back at those who were threatening their community. During this reflection they would weigh up their options within the context in which they were living. This act of reflection is an important consideration as many violent extremists project a view that they had no choice, claiming that the socio-political conditions forced them to use violence.

While a person may join a group whilst emotionally aroused in reaction to events around them, rather than through a radical ideological awakening, once they join a group then a number of psychological pressures push them into a deeper affiliation with the group and its ideological worldview. In Northern Ireland's segregated society Protestants and Catholics live separate lives. In what has been described as a 'benign form of apartheid', this segregation in homogenous groups has a significant impact on people's sense of identity, attitudes towards group members, perceptions of threat and biased attributions. However, once the individuals join extremist groups within these already segregated homogeneous partisan communities, the small group pressures are amplified. Inside these extremist cliques, the individuals are further insulated from the outside world and different opinions.

Being involved in these groups creates groupthink-like-conditions which foster conformity and remove barriers towards their involvement in extremist violence. Being active in these organisations also increases the sense of purpose, and feelings of empowerment, efficacy and decreased moral ambiguity. Being a member of a small secretive group also increases the sense of comradeship and brotherhood, heightening the sense of collective identity. For most combatants I have interviewed, these aspects



were further magnified during imprisonment. These experiences also provided the former combatants with a sense of purpose that sustained their activism beyond imprisonment and onto political or community work on their release.

These findings illustrate that any intervention to counter recruitment must focus on non-ideological factors and perceptions of injustice or grievances held by communities as this is the key precursor to involvement. These interventions must be able to respond to these perceptions without exacerbating them and further alienating the community. Once the individual is a member of an extremist group, the small group pressures and insulation from outside influences and discourses

make it much more difficult to change the individual's course. Thankfully, Northern Ireland has also shown us that with changes in the political context, people of violence can become peacemakers, and that the activism that fuelled their violence can also fuel their peace-building work.

*Neil Ferguson is Professor of Political Psychology at Liverpool Hope University. He leads a CREST-funded project on 'Learning and unlearning terrorism: The transition from civilian life into paramilitarism and back again during the conflict and peace process in Northern Ireland'. You can read about this research at [www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects)*

