

Conceptualising Protective Factors: Strengths-Based Approaches

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding about what protects against involvement in violent extremism and terrorism is in its infancy. Little concerted attention has been paid to developing a conceptual, theoretical or empirically informed account of how, when and why protective factors work. To begin to address these gaps in the research base, this report presents a preliminary model for conceptualising how protective factors might work in relation to violent extremism.

- Research on protective factors in relation to terrorism and violent extremism is limited.
- Relatively little empirical research has focused specifically on protective factors.
- There is considerable ambiguity as to how protective factors should be conceptualised.
- They have been interpreted as:
 - a. Reducing risk factors
 - b. The absence of risk factors
 - c. Buffers that mitigate risk factors
 - d. Conceptually distinct and unrelated to risk factors
- The means by which protective factors might shape pathways into and out of terrorism are likely to be complex. Their influence may differ according to:
 - a. The stage of engagement in extremism at which they are experienced
 - b. The ways in which they interact with other factors
 - c. The potential to exhibit non-linear effects on levels of risk
- Rather than interpreting protective factors in isolation, there are benefits from approaching protective factors holistically, taking account of the ways they interact and operate across micro, meso and macro levels.
- To develop a better understanding of protective factors, it is helpful to examine the processes and mechanisms by which they work; situate risk and protection in broader social contexts such as subcultures; and understand how values and norms influence which and how protective factors might work.



CONCEPTUALISING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- To address the conceptual challenges facing research on protective factors, this report sets out a preliminary model for interpreting protective factors.
- The framework is informed by a review of research on protective factors set out in an accompanying report: Protective Factors for Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Rapid Evidence Assessment (Marsden and Lee, 2022).
- Theoretically, the model is underpinned by strengths-based approaches to interpreting offending behaviour and reflects the following characteristics:
 - It follows research which suggests the Good Lives Model (GLM) has the potential to help explain how and why protective factors may work. The GLM assumes we all seek to pursue different configurations of ‘goods’, such as relatedness, community or agency. Offending (including terrorism offending) is considered a maladaptive means of achieving these goods and is influenced by obstacles to attaining them legally. This approach helps identify which goods matter in individual cases and may help interpret pathways into terrorism and violent extremism by identifying obstacles that make it difficult to achieve goods normatively and legally.
 - The GLM proposes that there are four obstacles that shape pathways towards offending: use of inappropriate means, for example using harmful or illegal ways of achieving goals; a lack of coherence in the way different goods relate to one another; a lack of scope, where particular goods come to dominate others; and insufficient capacity, when an individual’s internal capacities, or external circumstances mean it’s difficult to achieve primary goods legally.
 - Strengths-based approaches such as the GLM adopt a more holistic perspective than risk-oriented perspectives because they take greater account of the social-ecological context and how it interacts with individual level characteristics.
- Engaging in extremist subcultures can be understood as a way of deploying strengths in pursuit of goods which might otherwise be difficult to attain.
- Social-ecological and extremist subcultural contexts influence values and norms; shape which goods are important; and provide opportunities to pursue them.
- Protective factors include individual cognitive, psychological or behavioural capacities and external capacities reflected in an individual’s social-ecological context which enable people to pursue goods legally.
- Protective mechanisms are the broader processes by which protective factors operate. They are visible in relation to the four obstacles which undermine people’s ability to achieve goods normatively.
- Protective mechanisms work to realign or rebalance the coherence and scope of someone’s goals; change attitudes or access to the means of achieving goods legally; and increase someone’s capacity to attain goods without causing harm.
- The context within which goods can be pursued may be legal or illegal.
- Participation in extremist subcultures is through goal-directed practices which provide direct or indirect routes to achieving goods. Violence or criminality are only some of the possible outcomes of this process.
- Protection may be afforded through the opportunities extremist contexts provide to pursue goods through counter-normative but legal routes, where these satisfy the individual’s most significant goals. For example, someone’s desire to pursue the good of relatedness by developing close social ties in an extremist context could be met without the need to engage in violence or criminality.

NEXT STEPS

To assess whether this framework helps explain how protective factors and constraints on terrorist offending work, future work will benefit from:

1. UNDERSTANDING THE SUBCULTURAL DYNAMICS THAT:

- a. Provide opportunities to pursue goods by mapping the roles or goal-directed practices they make available.
- b. Shape values and norms that might act as constraints and understand whether these provide opportunities for people to achieve goods in ways that sustain non-violent engagement and/ or perform a protective function.

2. TEST THE ASSUMPTIONS OF THE GOOD LIVES MODEL TO DETERMINE:

- a. Whether involvement in terrorism can be understood as a means of achieving primary goods.
- b. If obstacles to achieving goods legally help explain pathways into terrorism.
- c. How protective mechanisms function in relation to terrorism offending.
- d. Whether obstacles to achieving goods help explain re-engagement.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This Executive Summary comes from a report produced from the Constraining Violence project. The project looks at how individual, social, and subcultural factors constrain the potential for extremist violence. You can find the report this summary is derived from (including references) as well as all the other outputs from this project at: crestresearch.ac.uk/project/constraining-violence

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