Title registration for a systematic review:

Counter-narratives for the prevention of violent radicalisation: a systematic review of targeted interventions

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Title of the review

Counter-narratives for the prevention of violent radicalization: a systematic review of targeted interventions

Background

Following the surge of foreign fighters travelling to join terrorist organisations abroad (Neumann, 2016) and an 80% increase in civilian deaths from acts of terrorism since 2014 (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015), those working to counter violent extremism (CVE) have identified preventative interventions as "key" to removing the "breeding ground" for the complex process by which an individual begins incrementally justifying violence as means of realising an 'extremist' goal, i.e. violent radicalisation (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2016, p. 10). Amongst these preventative solutions is the 'counter-narrative'. Intended to counteract propaganda, counter-narratives function to "contradict" and pick a part themes in extremist narratives. Such themes typically attempt to persuade audiences to support terrorism, through popular opinion or action (Braddock and Horgan, 2016, p. 381). The purpose of the counter-narrative is to reduce propensity towards violent radicalisation which would otherwise be stimulated by terrorist narratives.

Although frequently referred to as the logical solution, and even a "panacea" (Casebeer and Russel, 2005, p. 17), to countering violent extremism (Ranstorp and Hyllengren, 2013; Christmann, 2012; Her Majesty's Government, 2011; Neumann, 2011; Silber and Bhatt, 2007), others have described the counter-narrative as a "catch-all term" which is poorly understood (Briggs and Reve, 2013, p. 1). Despite several efforts to create effective counter-narratives in response to national and cross-national crises, it has been suggested that an effective counter-narrative has yet to be "designed, developed and disseminated" (Samuel, 2012, p. 31) and knowledge of 'what works' is lacking. Controversial attempts such as the 'Shared Values Initiative' in the United States, amongst others, highlight not only the futility but also the potential grievousness of poorly informed counter-narratives (Briggs and Reve, 2013, p. 26).

This review seeks to synthesise existing literature in the area of counter-narratives. The primary objective of the review is to synthesise available evidence on the impact of counter-narratives on both primary and secondary outcomes. Primary outcomes would include behavioural indications of violent radicalisation such as partaking in violent extremism. However, it is more likely that secondary outcomes, such as risk factors for violent radicalisation (e.g. pro-violence cognition), will be measured in included studies. Secondary objectives will involve completing a quality assessment of the studies included in the review.

As a contribution to the literature, this review will inform the work of those involved in designing counter-narratives for violent radicalisation, thus enabling them to engage in evidence-based-practice.

Objectives

Objective: The objective of this review is to provide a synthesis of the effectiveness of counter-narratives in reducing the likelihood of violent radicalisation into terrorism. The review question that will guide this research is:

Review question: What is the impact of counter-narratives on violent radicalisation (primary outcomes) and/or risk factors for violent radicalisation (secondary outcomes)?

Existing reviews

None.

Intervention

Eligible interventions will comprise of interventions which implement a narrative to counter a violent extremist narrative for the purpose of preventing violent radicalisation towards terrorism. For example, online implementation of a strategy by former extremists to provide counter-arguments against Islamic extremism in a chat-room setting for individuals identified as 'at-risk' of becoming radicalised followed by evaluation of individuals' response rates against demographically matched controls. The intervention can be operationalised as a counter-narrative as its premise is based on an existing narrative and only functions as a response to a specific narrative.

However, interventions which implement a narrative which does not challenge, contradict or "pick apart" an existing (or experimentally introduced) narrative ('the established narrative') will not be included. Such interventions are simply testing the vigour of terrorist tools and not creating a 'counter'-response. For example, Appel and Malečkar (2012, p. 45) exposed participants to a persuasive narrative on the details of a murder; however, the content did not challenge an existing narrative which participants held. The exposure material consisted of a novel story (presented as fictional, non-fictional or fake) and levels of persuasion were then measured between conditions. Similarly, de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders & Beentjes (2011) asked participants to read the transcripts of a job interview between an interviewer and a person with disabilities, manipulating the transcript's perspective. A control group gave their attitudes towards disabled people without the exposure but it was the attitudes between the two experimental (not control and experimental) conditions which were of interest. In both cases, the narratives sought to persuade participants but not challenge an existing narrative. Previous research in persuasive communication has tended to focus on socially "normative" messages, assuming to gather evidence from arbitrary topics (for example, anti-smoking or road safety campaigns). In other words, persuasive communication has been viewed as a phenomenon unthwarted by situation or subject matter (whereby, for example, the evidence informing an anti-smoking campaign will translate to an anti-extremism campaign). However, in the counter-terrorism literature, references have been made to 'tailor-made' counter-narratives to prevent violent radicalisation (conflict-specific, for example),

dismissing this 'one-size-fits-all' approach (Horgan, 2005; Schmid, 2014). Although terrorist narratives and counter-narratives should, by token of being persuasive, abide by the same psychological mechanisms which govern non-terrorist narratives and counter-narratives (Braddock and Horgan, 2016), a synthesis of extremism-specific studies will allow for a more specialised account of those most relevant to the subject matter. This has been noted as imperative by several experts in the field (Schmid, 2014, p. 19; Briggs and Reve, 2013, p. 26; Shaikh, 2013, p. 116). As such, interventions which provide a counter-narrative for a purpose other than the prevention of violent radicalisation will not be included.

Population

These strategies/interventions will target members of the public and/or those identified as 'at risk' of violent radicalisation worldwide. However, such terminology presents some challenges. It has been noted that risk assessment in this context is "fraught with difficulty" and the application of risk assessment tools to expose those most susceptible to, for example, extremist narratives is neither feasible nor ethical (Sarma, 2017).

Corman suggests that the population to be targeted by counter-narratives should be the same population targeted by terrorist narratives (2006, p. 94); Helmus (2013) expands upon this and explains how "fence-sitters" (or people who consider themselves neither "for" nor "against" the extremist group's narrative) should be a target population. More generally, Jacobsen (2009) simply suggests "the future generations" (p. 30) as suitable targets of counter-narratives. From these, it becomes increasingly apparent that our understanding of susceptibility to extremist influences is in its infancy.

Therefore, it is suggested that the types of populations to be included in this review will not be limited according to any demographic or situational factors as the definition of 'at-risk' is not well enough developed.

Outcomes

In their systematic review of counter-terrorism strategies, Lum, Kennedy and Sherley (2006) highlighted the difficulty with targeting or identifying outcomes for interventions which seek to prevent or reduce a highly complex phenomenon such as violent extremism. Similar to criminality, such interventions may not directly address the reduction of events (such as terrorist attacks) but, instead, focus on reducing "related risk factors" (p. 10). Examples of such risk factors may include attitudes (for example, towards , an adversary; see Bar-Natan, 2004 as cited in Salomon, 2004); knowledge (for example, of the contributory conflict; see Lustig, 2002 as cited in Salomon, 2004), traits (for example, empathy; see Garaigordobil, 2012), emotions (for example, anger or hostility) and; behavioural outcomes (including behavioural intention such as willingness to support a terrorist group or terrorism involvement; see Arce, Croson, & Eckel, 2011).

Study designs

Eligible studies (published or unpublished) must meet these requirements:

1) Describe exposure to a narrative either in digital or press format which contradicts or challenges an existing (or previously or subsequently implemented) narrative (a "counter-narrative").
2) Exposure to the counter-narrative(s) must be intended to reduce propensity towards violent radicalisation.
3) The study must report outcomes for the sample exposed to the counter-narrative.
4) The study must be published/reported in English.

Studies adopting an experimental design will be included in the review, and where at least one of the independent variables involves comparing a counter-narrative to a control or comparison exposure (e.g. two-group between subjects design). Other forms of experimental designs that we anticipate may be present in the literature include factorial designs, with more than one independent variable (e.g. pre-post as a within subjects variable, and exposure (e.g. present/absent) as a between subjects variable). Also single-group (pre-post) designs will be included where present. Quasi-experimental designs (e.g. interrupted time-series designs) and other forms of designs not using an experimental approach will be excluded from the review.

Feasibility

In response to the editors' comments regarding feasibility, this section has been included to illustrate that this is not intended as an 'empty review'. Prior to the official literature search, three studies have been identified which meet the eligibility criteria outlined above and would be suitable in achieving the objective of the systematic review (determining the effectiveness of the counter-narratives).

1. Cohen, Tal-Or and Mazor-Tregerman (2015) used a 2 x 2 between subjects factorial design in which Israeli participants with either pro-demonstration or anti-demonstration attitudes (IV1) were randomly assigned to either a pro-demonstration or anti-demonstration condition (IV2) before attitudes towards demonstrations and towards the narrative were measured (DVs).

2. Garagozov (2013) used a five group, between-subjects experimental design whereby Azerbaijani participants with prejudiced attitudes towards Armenians were randomly assigned to one of four experimental counter-narrative conditions (1. "Common suffering", 2. "Common cultural traits", 3. "Blame the Russians" and; 4. "Apology") or a control condition before their implicit attitudes towards Armenians were measured.

3. Alhabash and Wise (2012) used a 2 x 2 mixed factorial design whereby American students with predetermined, anti-Palestinian/pro-Israeli attitudes were assigned to play a video

game in which they either played the role of the Palestinian president (IV1, condition 1: counter-narrative) or the Israeli prime minister (IV1, condition 2: comparison) and their attitudes towards Palestinians (DV) pre-game play (IV2, time 1) and post-game play (IV2, time 2) were measured.

Tables

Table 1. Search terms

Search domain	Topical domain	Key Words
Title or Abstract	Intervention (*'counter-narrative'*)	Alter-messaging, Alternative framing, Anti-messaging, anti-radicalism message, anti-radicalization message, Anti-terrorist campaign, Anti-violence campaign, Argument scrutiny, attitude-change, Citizen messenger, Common narrative, Contesting narratives, Countering ideological support for extremism, Counter analogy, Counter-argument, Counter-attitudinal, Counter-campaign, Counter example, Counter-ideological, Counter-message, Counter-messaging campaign, Counter-messaging intervention, Counter-messaging interventions, Counter-messaging strategy, Counter-messenger, Counter-narrative, Counter-narrative campaign, Counter-narrative message, counter-radicalisation, counter-recruitment, counter-speech, counter-strategy, countering campaign, countering materials, ideological counterpoint, strategic narrative, narrative intervention, narrative transportation, public diplomacy, rhetorical education, Security narrative, strategic communication, Ideological response.
Title or Abstract AND Full Text	Research area (*'counter-terrorism'*)	Anti-colonialism, Anti-imperialist, Anti-terror, Anti-terrorism, Battle of Ideas, Conflict, Conflict resolution, Counter-terrorism, counter-radicalization, Countering Violent Extremism, CVE, Deradicalisation, Disengagement, Extremism, Ideological distortion, ideological distortions, Ideological battle, Ideological War, Indoctrination, intellectual activist, Islamic terrorism, Islamist terrorism, militant activist, Online radicalisation, Recruit, Radical, Radical group, Radical movement, Radicalisation, Radicalism, Security, Terrorism, Terrorist action, violence, Violent Extremism, War, War of ideas, Terrorist threat, Terrorist incident, Terrorist ideology, Terrorist

			sympathiser ,Violent extremism online, Violent extremist ideology, Violent extremist message.
Full Text	Problem *narrative*)	*('terrorist*	Alternative historical accounts, Extremist propaganda, Extremist sympathiser, Audio-visual production, Branding, Collective memory, Digital communication, Extremism online, Extremist argument, Extremist content online, Extremist ideology, Extremist message, Extremist narrative, Anti-American, anti American, Anti-American rhetoric, Global narrative, Ideology, Ideological influence, ideological legitimization, Ideological message, Ideological support, Indoctrination, Islamist extremist narrative, Islamist ideology, Jihadi ideologues, Justifications f, violence, Legitimacy of terrorism, Local narrative, Master Narrative, Media communication, Message, Message manipulation, Meta-narrative, Misinformation, Misinformation online, Narrative, narrative criminology, Narrative transformation, Observational Argument, Online extremism, opinion change, Persuasion, Persuasive communication, Personal narrative, Persuasive strategies, Political idea, Political strategy, Propaganda campaign, radicalism, radical ideology, radical narrative, radical perspective, radical perspectives, radical theorist, radical worldview, recruitment narrative, Religio-ideological, Religious justification, Rhetoric, Rhetorical tactics, Rhetorical terrorism, Rhetorical vision, Social-influence, Statements, Terror, recruitment strategies

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Roles and responsibilities

Dr Kiran Sarma is an expert in the psychology of risky and extreme behaviour, including political violence and terrorism. Dr Sarma has published extensively on clinical forensic topics in journals such as Public Health, The British Journal of Psychology, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Forensic and Legal Medicine and Accident Analysis and Prevention.

Dr Sarma also has extensive experience in systematic review methods and information retrieval, having co-authored several systematic reviews and meta-analyses on the topics of risk taking.

Dr O'Hora is a Chartered Psychologist (teaching and research) and Associate Fellow in the British Psychological Society (BPS). He has expertise in research design and systematic review writing, having published alongside Dr Kiran Sarma.

Sarah Carthy has content knowledge in terrorism and counter-terrorism policies. Having co-authored a systematic review on school-based counter-radicalisation interventions which will be published in PLoS One, she has a good knowledge of systematic review methods and information retrieval. As research psychologists, both Dr Sarma and Sarah Carthy have expertise in statistical analysis.

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Potential conflicts of interest

None.

Preliminary timeframe

- Date you plan to submit a draft protocol: 10 July 2017
- Date you plan to submit a draft review: 30 July 2017