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# FORMATION OF THE RADICAL SELF: CONSTRUCTS OF CHANGE IN WESTERN YOUTH TO ACTS OF TERRORISM ON HOME-SOIL

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## Abstract

*The terrorist attack on a member of the Police service by a 15 year old boy in late 2015 sent shock waves not only through Australia but also throughout the world as the realisation of Islamic State targeting teenagers becomes a reality. This paper uses a blend of theoretical and empirical evidence to examine how the radicalised self is formed. Insights from various frameworks including: developmental psychology (teenage identity formation and role confusion), Foucault's technologies of the self, governmentality and sociological issues including the perceived gap between Muslim values and those of the West. Coupled with these theoretical frameworks are empirical insights including the use of grievances and key discourses, radicalisation material as well as the use of future pacing strategies to embed change to acts of violence. Ultimately, recruiters aim to take advantage of teenage identity issues as well as marginalised individuals to help construct a radicalised youth prepared to undertake acts of terrorism on home-soil.*

## Keywords

Young people, adolescents, self formation, terrorism, radicalisation , extremism

## INTRODUCTION

The terrorist attack on a member of the Police service by a 15 year old boy in late 2015 sent shock waves not only through Australia but also throughout the world as the realisation of Islamic State (IS) targeting teenagers becomes a reality. Prior to this attack, an increasing number of teenage boys and girls have travelled overseas to join Islamic State (ABC\_News, 2015). Given government actions to cancel passports of those seeking to travel to join Islamic State (IS) (Cox, 2014), coupled with increasing military pressure on IS in Iraq and now Syria (Schmitt & Gordon, 2015), terrorism on home soil becomes an important option for IS to legitimise its reach and its power. Such attacks serve as important propaganda purposes for further radicalisation. Targets for recruitment are becoming younger with teenagers now an important target.

Targets for recruitment are becoming younger with teenagers now an important target for IS (Benns, Mullany & Auerbach, 2015). Therefore, understanding this phenomenon needs to be a priority for researchers and law enforcement so that a better understanding of the processes can help inform policy makers and prevent attacks. This paper aims to be a part of this process by examining the formation of the radical self especially in relation to youth. By using a number of theoretical frameworks, these can then be compared and contrasted to empirical data collected as part of a major PhD research study. Theoretical frameworks are outlined here and then further comparisons made in the discussion.

## Developmental Psychology

While the identity struggle during the teenage years is well known, a more detailed examination is best referred to by one of the earlier most prominent psychologists - Erikson (1970) who specifically wrote about the identity crisis during the teenage years. Erikson (1970) describes identity formation as a subjective sense that can also be observed by others. This sense of the observable gives rise to the possibility of identification of youth at risk, however, much more precision is needed.

One of the most significant aspects of identity formation in teenagers is that it is normal to have a dark side or negative 'fragments' (Erikson, 1970). Consequently, this is a dimension that can put youth at risk of being misguided by themselves and others. This is particularly the case when young people are subject to content rich media with appealing graphics that can be scanned and processed quickly (Lennings, Amon, Brummert and Lennings, 2010). With this in mind, what makes the difference as to whether this dark side of identity formation is resolved or can be utilised for radicalisation? Erikson (1970) argues that it is the social dimension that is critical. Essentially, identity formation is a psychosocial process where one's internal psychology interacts with the social norms and frameworks that can either safely guide them through this stage or otherwise put them at risk. Identity confusion is not abnormal but needs to be associated with strong cultural norms to help navigate a young person through (Erikson, 1970). Surges of emotion present during adolescent years can draw a person

towards a particular ideology or charismatic person (Lennings et al., 2010). This is also exacerbated by the Muslim divide, where some Muslim youth may have identity struggles in fitting into Western culture when compared to what is expected in the Muslim home.

### **Technologies of the Self**

While using different terminology, Foucault's technologies of the self also are premised on the same idea that identity formation is based on self and others or the social dimension. Technologies of the self looks at identity but using a very different perspective to other sociological theories. Technologies of the self examine how individuals construct their identity and transform themselves in conjunction with the aid of others in the socialisation process (Foucault, 1997a). Foucault not only looked at the discourses related to self but also the practices that an individual undertook in order to undergo this transformation. Although Foucault (1997a) focused on early Christian practices such as confession and self examination, these techniques are applicable to other religious and non-religious contexts. Practices such as writing for self and others (Foucault, 1997a) are used widely apart from early Christian practices and can be seen in online pages of Islamic extremists on social media.

Foucault (1997b) was interested in a number of key questions such as: how is knowledge of oneself formed? How are these knowledge schemes created, imposed and circulated? Foucault (1997b, p. 87) emphasised that it is:

... the procedures, which no doubt exist in every civilization, suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge.

In other words, procedures are prescribed in cultures and subcultures regarding how to transform the self especially in terms of forms of knowledge that one must have as well as creating and maintaining a given identity.

Another equally important aspect of technologies of the self deals with the issue of truth. Foucault (1997b) views truth as a construction based on certain knowledge schemas rather than an absolute entity. Put otherwise, what is viewed as truth to an Islamic radical will be very different to what is viewed as truth to most Westerners.

### **Governmentality and Sociological Issues**

Following on from technologies of the self is the concept of governance (Dean, 1999). Once again governance is something that can be put onto others to help shape them as well as being self directed in terms of self governance and identity formation.

Based on Foucault's work on technologies of the self which looked early Christian practices, Dean (1999) has created a framework for examining technologies of the self as follows:

1) **Ontology** - WHAT aspect of self we seek to act upon. For example, it is the flesh that must be subjugated. This aspect focuses on the aspect of the self that one is seeking to change. Nevertheless, it is overly simplistic to suggest that only one aspect of the self may be targeted. Therefore, analysis will look at all aspects and how emphasis is placed on each.

2) **Ascetics** - HOW we govern this aspect. For example, spiritual exercises as well as surveillance from others. This aspect is an important part of understanding radicalisation as it looks at the HOW question. Not only are activities that one undertakes to transform the self looked at but also the seemingly insignificant mechanisms and habits used on a regular basis.

3) **Deontology** - WHO we are when we are governed. For example, as one that must master the temptations of the flesh. This aspect of technologies of the self focuses on identity. Two intersecting dimensions are important here; first is the identity being imposed or trying to be normalised onto a person, and second, is what type of identity a person is seeking. In other words identity becomes constructed by both self and other.

4) **Teleology** - WHY we are governed, our end goal. For example, to achieve a noble life and salvation. One of the most important aspects of technologies of the self is the ultimate goal or purpose of undertaking this process of self transformation. Once again, this aspect has two dimensions, the goal of the individual and the goal of the collective group

## METHOD

Data was collected using a longitudinal online ethnographic study using the social media site Facebook. Emphasis was on key discourses related to self formation with a focus on how others were being directed to form themselves as well as how individuals shaped themselves. This included posted text, key document links as well as keywords or phrases found on images. No interaction was undertaken with participants in accordance with guidelines set down by the Human Research Ethics Committee. In addition to discourses, a number of case studies also became a key focus of data collection. As part of the case study focus, the researcher also recorded key observations in a field journal from which later synthesis was also undertaken in conjunction with other data.

Data was collected using a Grounded Theory approach in which data collection and analysis followed a cyclic approach. Data analysis focused on discourses related to self formation and in particular those targeting younger recruits. Furthermore, data was also categorised into Dean's (1999) governmentality framework based on Foucault's technologies of the self. Data is presented using these categorisations and compared to theoretical frameworks.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Online techniques and discourses used to help frame the radical self

This first section is an examination of the process that recruiters use to help an individual achieve processes of radical self formation. These are presented as a series of stages based on the researcher's observations and extensive online ethnographic immersion. Both the non Muslim (white moor) and Muslim are included as part of this process. Table 1 presents the expanded process for a non Muslim. Muslims may have some aspects of stages 1 to 8 with a greater focus on stage 9 onwards.

*Table 1 - How radical self formation is enabled by recruiters*

Stage	Processes	Sample posts (where applicable)
1. Group monitoring	This involves <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● group monitoring</li> <li>● watching streamed threads, discussions, topics</li> <li>● monitor individuals over a given timeframe               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Look at: what do they post, what they respond to, reactions to geopolitical issues, how often they post, reply, engage, how often they are online, who interacts with the target, determine state and location if possible</li> </ul> </li> <li>● build a profile of given individuals               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ profile likes, interests, hobbies such: as x-box, movies, tv shows, music, sports, athletics, profile connections, books, apps, games, public groups to which they belong, places visited, reviews for services, foods, restaurants</li> </ul> </li> <li>● SLOWLY integrating into thread discussions of the individuals - targets.</li> </ul>	
2. Make contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● build rapport, trust, bonds, relationships and friendships</li> <li>● look at ideas and interests of target</li> <li>a. Connect/ bond over points - personal ownership of events</li> <li>b. Affirm - offer emotional support or encouragement. Ethic of care. particular attention is paid to emotions - helplessness, lonely, sad, powerlessness, anger</li> </ul>	'swans are a great team' 'used to listen to that music a while ago' 'I dated a girl like that' ' I like to go to the gym with the boys' 'I also have that x-box game' 'bought that iphone last week'  'you have days like that, days will be shit hey' 'my parents never understood me either' [breakdown bonds] 'my parents fought all the time'

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● listen to target and what they say</li> <li>● give them a voice or platform to share</li> <li>● reinforce that the target is heard, understood and respected</li> <li>● validate the targets message</li> <li>● prepare target to be introduced to other recruiters</li> <li>● meet a need</li> </ul> <p>c. Connect to other recruiters online</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● reinforce online and offline environment</li> <li>● reinforce end goal</li> <li>● other recruiters join discussion</li> <li>● aim of multiple points of contact is to build solid relationships via trust and rapport</li> <li>● try and get target to spend more time online and start isolating themselves from significant others</li> </ul>	<p>as well. I used music to drown it out until I found something better' - preparing for future pacing techniques</p> <p>'school is a waste of time always having to do what teachers tell you' [dissociation]</p> <p>'cops are power hungry pigs, forget them'</p> <p>'I have friends who have experienced what we have'</p>
3. Add to personal account	<p>Target is added to personal account of main recruiter and others that were introduced</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● create targeted isolation (online institution)</li> <li>● rate and timing depends on individual case and amount of trust that has developed</li> </ul>	
4. Construct target to new institutional setting of personal profiles	<p>a. Introduce geo-political postings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ pose provocative questions</li> <li>○ open target to atrocities of Muslims</li> <li>○ break down targets internal constructs/defences</li> <li>○ discuss political issues (future pacing)</li> <li>○ recruiters use multiple accounts to reply (appear as many friends)</li> </ul> <p>b. Introduce grievances</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ raw imaging to commence</li> </ul>	<p>'what type of government would allow this to happen?'</p> <p>'the government is always sticking its nose in Muslim affairs'</p> <p>'Islam is criminalised'</p> <p>'Muslims sisters are raped, children murdered by occupants of our lands'</p> <p>'unlawful raids of brothers'</p>
5. Engage the target in geopolitical discussions	<p>Gently draw out opinions of target, see where they sit and respond accordingly</p> <p>a. Support posts - reinforce with more detailed posts</p> <p>b. Unsure - provide more images, more links, use videos and blogs</p> <p>c. Disagree - continue to build connection, reassure target. Bring target back to their own feelings of helplessness. Redirect to anti government focus eg prison planet and activist sites.</p>	
6. Meet needs	<p>Find out what real needs are of the target, such as friendships. Connect and meet needs while isolating from other outside influences</p>	
7. Dawah	<p>Making an invitation, call to Islam. Focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Empowerment - power to act and take control of our lives</li> <li>● Sense of purpose - call to the plans and path of Allah. Connect to a destiny bigger than himself. Introduce miracle of Quran containing scientific knowledge.</li> <li>● Sense of belonging - worldwide Ummah, brotherhood of believers, jihad as the fight to stop oppression of fellow Muslims</li> <li>● Use attitude influencing mechanisms and reinforce grievances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● If Catholic - challenge trinity , 'God has no partners', challenge idols in the church, Question Rome and church</li> <li>● If Christian - challenge trinity, divinity of Jesus questioned (just a prophet), dispute sacrifice for sins, Tawhid - oneness of God reinforced</li> </ul>

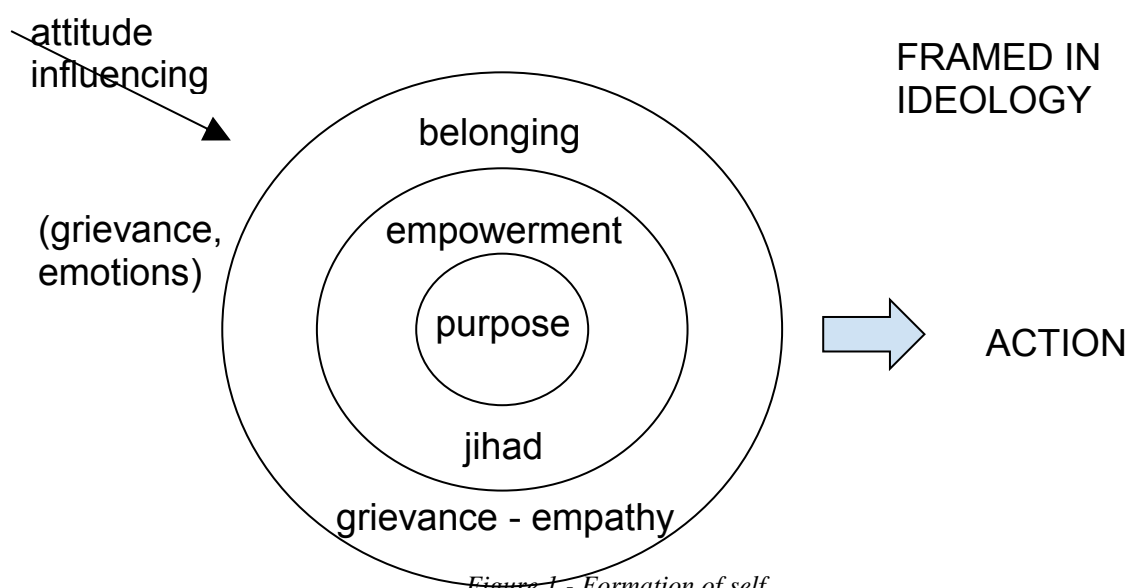
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● If non believer of a faith - nurture target with sense of purpose, sense of belonging, empowerment with a focus on government interference in Muslim affairs and grievance</li> </ul>
8. Reversion complete	Take Shahadah - declaration of faith. Purification rituals and full body washing (Ghusl), salat strict prayer times, ritual washings - wudhu, set movements in prayer Extremist ideologies reinforced at this stage - doctrinal decrees to legitimize extremist ideological position	
9. Online-offline community connectivity	To strengthen online extremism often there are attempts to link to key radicals in local community if possible <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● reinforce online mentoring</li> <li>● help meet needs physically</li> <li>● create greater isolation from previous environment</li> <li>● stay the course - offline connections help target to maintain online connections and mentoring, as well as generating pockets in the community for radical elements to help shape the recruit with future pacing techniques</li> </ul>	
10. Encourage charity work	This may be skipped completely depending on telos of recruiters. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● help oppressed/suppressed Muslims</li> <li>● help orphans/widows</li> <li>● visit sick and outcast</li> </ul>	
11. Prep for action	Exhaustive future pacing, anchoring, association, dissociation (NLP strategies) Focus on solution to grievances in various forms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Propagate attitude influencing mechanisms - directly target youth to aggressive action in home community against 'oppressor'. Second generation male youth Muslims are lead to stay in their communities and are subsequently future paced to carry out violence on home-soil - strike fear into the heart of the infidel and bring justice to the worldwide oppressed Ummah</li> <li>● May recruit other young people from existing or new friendship circles - depending on agenda</li> <li>● Travel overseas - may be guised as aid work. Making connections, training, being part of a terror group or state-building for the Islamic Caliphate</li> </ul>	

Table 1 illustrates that a successful radicalisation strategy depends on making strong connections and isolating an individual within an online institution. Lennings et al. (2010) reported that youth were more susceptible to information that was quickly processed such as stereotypical information coupled with a strong focus on graphic media. Research from this study supported this notion with Islamic State heavily relying on graphics and in particular multimedia videos on Facebook linked to YouTube.

Emotion was also found to be a key dimension targeted by recruiters. However, rather than being opposed to reason or cognitive frameworks, in congruence with Smith (2015), emotions were used to support and enhance cognitive frameworks.

### **Self created discourses and techniques used to frame the radical self and insights into identity formation**

Strategies for self formation relied on voluntarily entering the online institution with disciplined regularity. To engage in a process of self transformation, individuals needed to engage with ideologies, discourses and most significantly the media experiences presented online.



*Figure 1 - Formation of self*

Identity conflicts were found to be an important psychological dimension in homegrown jihadists (King & Taylor, 2011). These identity conflicts became critical for the formation of the self. As illustrated in Figure 1, an individual's sense of belonging, empowerment and purpose is central to the transformation of the self.

Individuals seek to develop a sense of belonging by redirecting empathy towards the suffering of fellow Muslims (Figure 1). Such redirection can trigger personal distress (Lamm & Majdandžić, 2015), making an individual more prone to identity issues. Empowerment is gained through a commitment to jihad which ultimately becomes the individual's sense of purpose. Another important part of this process is the reframing of morality through radical discourses.

One of the most important techniques found in this study to aid formation of the radical self is the constant exposure of the self to radical material and radical interactions on social media. This is particularly important given the research that indicates that while high media techniques have greater power to influence a younger audience, their effect is more transient (Lennings et al., 2010). Hence the only way to effectively create change is to regularly expose oneself to these radical discourses all framed in a radical ideology.

### **Connection between external discourses and identity formation**

Grievances are not only the foundational discourse for radicalisation on which jihad and martyrdom are built but also the connection point between external online discourses as well as internal identity formation. Stankov, Higgins, Saucier and Knežević (2010) indicated that grievance or grudge as they termed it was an essential trigger for radicalisation. Although by itself it was not sufficient to propagate violence. Interestingly, according to neuroscience, the same mirror neurons responsible for empathy also make a person vulnerable to violent influences (Greenemeier, 2011). Consequently an individual with strong empathetic grievances is also more likely to be influenced into violent action. Furthermore, the process of just listening to violent discourses was found by neuroscientists to make an individual more prone to be violent (Lamm & Majdandžić, 2015).

Despite the many variations on the way that individuals progress to radical self formation, Reinares et al. (2008) argue that ideology and the cognitive frameworks are constant and always present in cases of Islamic based (or in fact any form of) terrorism. This study strongly supported that reframing cognitive frameworks were essential to enhance radicalisation. In fact when properly framed, violence is not only logical but seen as necessary to solve various social issues (Smith, 2015).

### **Governmentality model**

Dean's (1999) governmentality model provides a summary of the formation of the radical self from the aforementioned discussion. What is particularly important is the intersection between self and other in psychosocial self formation as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2 - Governmentality model of radical self formation

Dimension	Role of others	Role of self
<b>Ontology</b> - WHAT aspect of self we seek to act upon.	Change cognitive frameworks using emotive dimensions.	Work on identity and purpose develop meaning through extremist discourses.
<b>Ascetics</b> - HOW we govern this aspect.	Isolate an individual in certain pages and exposure to media promoting radical ideology.	Regular online interaction and engagement with media to develop personal needs.
<b>Deontology</b> - WHO we are when we are governed.	A warrior committed to jihad in the path of Allah	An individual with a sense of purpose and destiny with a sense of grievance and need for justice.
<b>Teleology</b> - WHY we are governed, our end goal.	To form a warrior who will help create a global Islamic Caliphate.	A personal destiny framed in an ideological commitment to Allah that may include violence.

Table 2 illustrates that while recruiters have specific goals and methods in mind to transform a young person, their own self formation is focused on belonging, empowerment and purpose to give them a sense of identity and destiny. Extremist discourses are presented as the solution to an individual's identity crisis and hence youth are encouraged to internalise key discourses of grievance, jihad and martyrdom. These discourses are presented in such a way as to meet identity needs.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has a number of important implications in the need to protect young people from being radicalised. First, is the use of control orders. Given the short term but powerful effects of media on youth (Lennings et al., 2010), Control Orders have the power to break the cycle of influence of a young person by keeping them away from online influences as well as any associated individuals deemed as having a negative radicalising influence. However, such measures should not be used in isolation but be supplemented with counselling services as well as programs that utilise Islamic youth leaders (Amf, 2015).

Second, by better understanding the mechanisms and the needs of young people being targeted, intervention and counselling strategies can be better designed to be more effective in rehabilitating young people away from the negative influences of radicalisation while still aiming to address key needs of belonging, empowerment and a sense of purpose in a constructive way.

Intervention to protect at risk youth has now become critical and necessary in order to shield them from skillful recruiters, high quality media campaigns and their own sense of identity formation which may inherently put them at risk.

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