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INSTITUTIONALISED MORAL REFRAMING: A RESEARCH BASED MODEL ON ISLAMIC RADICALISATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

Institutionalised Moral Reframing is a new research model on Islamic radicalisation based on a longitudinal ethnographic research on social media. Prior to introducing the model, an overview of other radicalisation models will be presented with a brief overview of each. Critical to the Institutionalised Moral Reframing model is the concept of socialisation via an online institution of social media where an individual is isolated from competing discourses. The model uses two axis, a moral authority axis and a moral discourses axis. These two axis are mutually reinforcing and enable an individual to progress along stages in a context that includes multifactorial bubbles which encapsulate the many factors responsible for an individual's radicalisation.

Keywords

Radicalisation models, Islamic radicalisation, terrorism, morality, social media, online radicalisation, Facebook

INTRODUCTION

Radicalisation models are not new and several have been developed since 9/11. However, some of these are conceptual models rather than being research based. Those that are research based have not been designed around the online environment. This paper introduces a new research based model of radicalisation exclusively based around social media and more specifically Facebook and associated media. Prior to outlining this model it is useful to examine some of the previous models and how they have contextualised radicalisation.

Borum's Four Stage Model into a Terrorist's Mindset (2003)

Borum's (2003) four stage model was designed to give law enforcement officials an insight into the radicalisation process and was developed as a conceptual rather than as an empirical model. The main theoretical underpinning of the model was to demonstrate how grievances can be turned into hatred against a particular group (Borum, 2011). Borum's (2011) four stage model is given below in Figure 1.

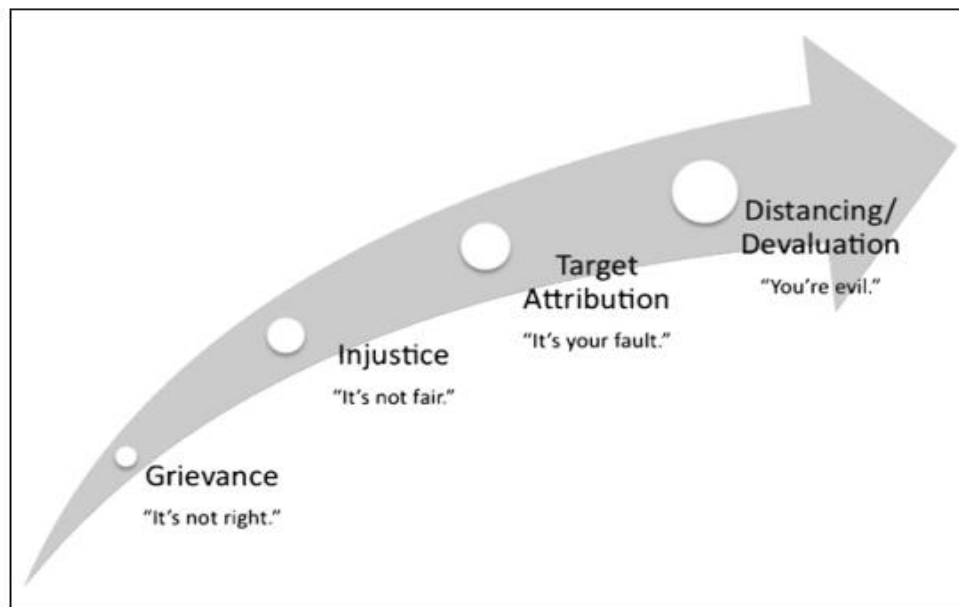


Figure 1 - Borum's 4 stage model from (Borum, 2003; Borum, 2011, p. 39)

Moghaddam's terrorism staircase (2005)

Moghaddam's model outlines the path to terrorism as a staircase of stages with fewer and fewer individuals progressing onto each of the following stages in the staircase (Moghaddam, 2005). Figure 2 illustrates these six stages. Key aspects of this model include its reference to grievances as well as its link to moral engagement.

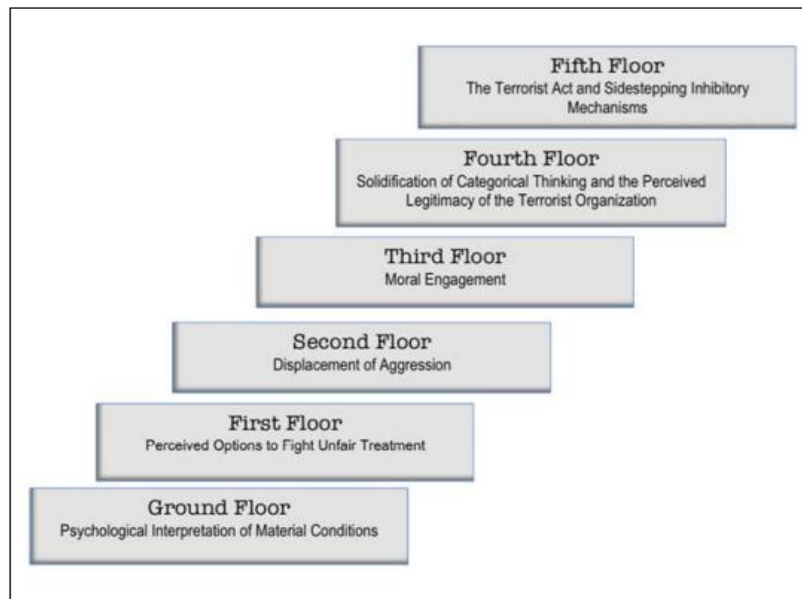


Figure 2 - Moghaddam's staircase model (Borum, 2011, p. 40; Moghaddam, 2005)

Wiktorowicz's Analytical Model Based on British Extremists (2005)

Wiktorowicz's model was based on a study of radical extremists in Britain (Young, 2013). Similar to the previous two models, it is also a phase based model. This model (Figure 3) has been influential amongst researchers given its detailed stages and use of a solid research base (Schmid, 2013). This model provides a number of important insights including contextual factors and religious/ideology beliefs.

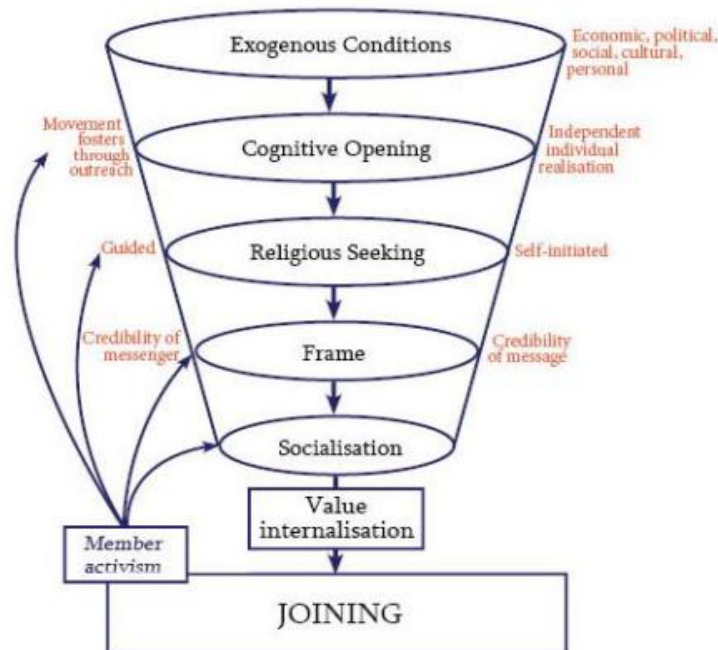


Figure 3 - Wiktorowicz's model from (Schmid, 2013, p. 23)

Helfstein's four stage model (2012)

Helfstein's (2012) four stage model is a newer phase model with some important differences. Unlike previous phase models that have been criticised for being too linear, Helfstein's model views the phases as cyclic and dynamic rather than linear and includes regression as well as revisiting previous stages (See Figure 4) (Helfstein, 2012).

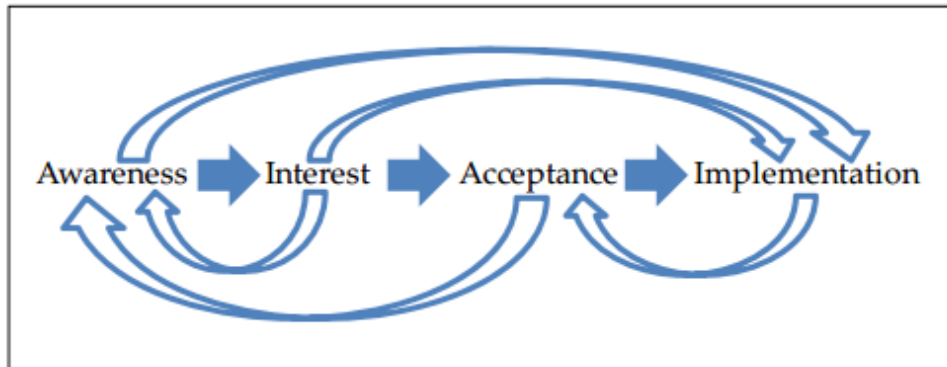


Figure 4 - Helfstein's four stage model of radicalisation (Helfstein, 2012, p.18)

Helfstein (2012) noted that while internet sites, YouTube and online magazines such as Inspire carry and convey the ideology of radicals, it is Facebook that makes it interactive and facilitates the social process.

METHOD

This model of online social media radicalisation was based on a longitudinal online ethnography over four years. Focus was on Facebook and associated links including YouTube and key websites. No interaction was made with participants and consent was not sought. In addition, research was done under pseudonym profiles. Type of data collected included text/discourses from Facebook, visual images associated with key discourses, linked videos and researcher's field observations.

In terms of stages, the longitudinal study first focused on text based discourse classification and synthesis followed by visual image analysis. Finally a number of case studies started during initial stages were continued including the researcher's observations. The model in this paper is based on the synthesis of both discourses and researcher's observations over the longitudinal study. Essentially, it is a research based model based on social media and more specifically Facebook and its associated links.

ANALYSIS OF NEW MODEL: INSTITUTIONALISED MORAL REFRAMING

The Institutionalised Moral Reframing model will be presented in several parts. An overview of the reframing process will be given followed by a breakdown of the two axes. Finally, a more detailed look at the factors influencing socialisation will be undertaken.

The reframing process

Transformation of a person's moral framework requires a transformation along two axis as indicated in Figure 5. Along the horizontal axis is the independent variable, namely the transformation of moral authority. Along the vertical axis is dependent variable, the transformation of moral discourse axis. Essentially, there can be no transformation of an individual's internalised moral discourse without first transforming how moral authority is developed as well as identifying who and where does an individual need to go in order to identify the moral framework they need. That said, these two axes are mutually reinforcing as represented by the two way arrows from each axis. In other words, discourses can reinforce forms of moral authority as well as moral authority giving credibility to key discourses.

Progression of individuals along these axes cannot occur without institutional socialisation. In other words social media becomes an institution within which a socialisation process occurs to move individuals diagonally toward the outcome of a fully radicalised individual. The term 'fully radicalised' in this model means an individual who has a clear personal goal to conduct jihad operations while being prepared to face martyrdom or a person who is actively seeking martyrdom (Figure 5). Of course, not all individuals will progress fully along the diagonal and thus may only be partially radicalised.

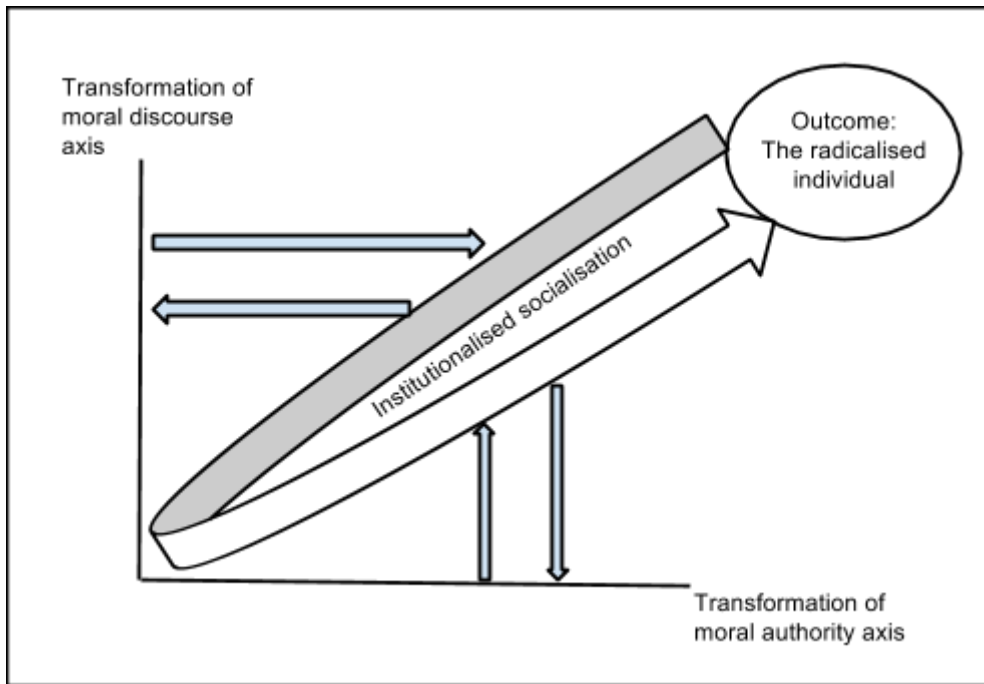


Figure 5- An overview of the reframing process

One final note is needed on the curved arrow given in the diagrammatic overview of the reframing process (Figure 5). In congruence with Helfstein (2012), stages or progression are certainly not linear and individuals may regress or progress at different rates. In addition, in congruence with Moghaddam (2005) the number of individuals progressing along the stages or path of radicalisation shows a continual decrease with the number of fully radicalised individuals being only a small proportion of those who started on the path to radicalisation.

Now the model will be expanded in three sections with further diagrammatic expansions of Figure 5. Each of the two axes will be broken down into stages and finally the process of institutionalised socialisation will be discussed.

Moral authority axis

As moral authority is transformed, new moral discourses can be embedded within an individual's moral framework and internalised to create a new belief system on which to base actions. To further elaborate on the transformation of moral authority axis Figure 6 illustrates the key stages of authority transformation. Six stages have been identified in the transformation of moral authority process. These stages do not necessarily follow a linear process and may involve a cycling of stages. Given the longitudinal nature of the online investigation as well as the length of time needed to complete a moral transformation, the number of stages must be sufficient to represent this, yet at the same time avoid an overly complex process that would reduce the effectiveness of the model.

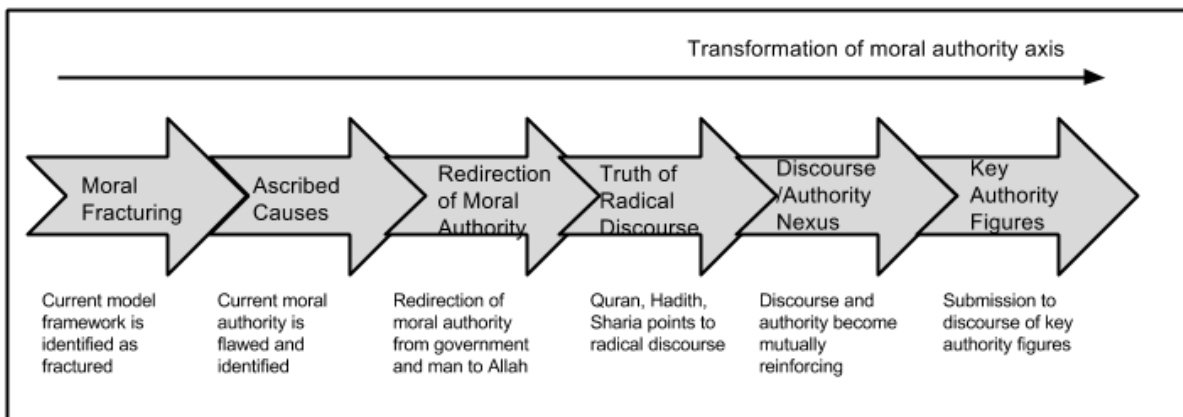


Figure 6 - Transformation on the moral authority axis

The first stage in Figure 6 is the identification of the fact that a person's current moral framework is fractured, it does not make sense. Connecting with a person's sense of disillusionment, their grievances or their anti-government sentiments becomes a critical starting point. This stage may be a process that needs to occur or it may be as Wiktorowic's model terms it a 'cognitive opening' or connection point for further radicalisation. Critically, unless a deficiency is identified in a person's current moral framework then there is no impetus for change. A person must be or become dissatisfied with their current moral framework which is often based on their contextual social norms.

Identifying causes of a person's fractured moral framework is the second stage in transforming moral authority. It was a difficult decision of whether or not this stage should be combined with the first stage. Many individuals who know things are not right with the world also know who is to blame for this. Governments who often use moral rhetoric to justify certain acts can and are quickly targeted as a flawed moral authority. However, the decision to separate this second stage applies to some individuals who may be suffering a sense of disillusionment but may not be aware of who is to blame. Individuals may have to be coaxed along through key discourses to develop this sense of blame.

The third step is the beginning of the shift in moral authority where it is redirected from governments and man to Islam and Allah. It is important to avoid the assumption that just because an individual identifies as a muslim that their moral authority comes from Islam and Allah. A new revert, a secular minded muslim or a muslim with little understanding of Islamic discourses may have existing humanistic sources of moral authority or may simply be lost in terms of moral direction. Prior to any specific focus on radical discourses a person must hold the centrality of Islam and Allah as the source of moral authority given that Islamic radicalism is based on the foundations of duty to Allah and Islam as a political and revolutionary system.

Radical discourses must be framed as the true discourses of Islam. This is the fourth stage of moral authority. Using the Qur'an, Hadith and Sharia law, radical discourses that embrace the path of jihad are painted as true Islam and discourses that reject or minimise jihad are painted as false. Jihad becomes the central focus of these radical discourses and justified through multiple sources, most notably the central discursive authority of Islam. Once individuals accept that the Qur'an supports jihad and radical discourses, the discourse/authority nexus becomes more focused as the fifth stage. Throughout the stages, discourse and authority have been mutually reinforcing each other, however, once jihad is accepted as the correct moral pathway, discourses that invoke or promote jihad are given authority and so a cycle begins. Importantly, a framework for acceptable discourses has been set that must fall within given parameters as set up by the previous stage otherwise it is rejected (Carter, Maher & Neumann, 2014).

The sixth and final stage is recognition of authority of key figures and martyrs. Anwar al-Awlaki has long been considered an authority figure on radical jihad, however, following his death and more importantly the rise of the Islamic State, many other clerics have become key authority figures especially via their broadcasts on YouTube (Carter, Maher & Neumann, 2014). In addition, the words of martyrs were found to be given authority due to their actions reinforcing their discourse.

Moral discourse axis

In similar fashion to the moral authority axis, the moral discourse axis also provides a series of stages which are not always linear and may involve regression. Figure 7 represents the key stages of transformation of moral discourse axis through six stages. One of the most important research findings in terms of morality is that it is difficult to defend a universal sense of morality, however, evidence strongly supports specific group based morality (Strong, 2008). In other words, morality is a constructed concept within particular social groups, in this case Islamic extremists.

While these stages of moral discourse relate to key narratives of grievance, jihad and martyrdom, there are some important differences. The narratives themselves need to be differentiated from the way narratives are processed by individuals and it is this processing or internalising of narrative discourse that provides the basis of the other stages of the transformation of the moral discourse axis.

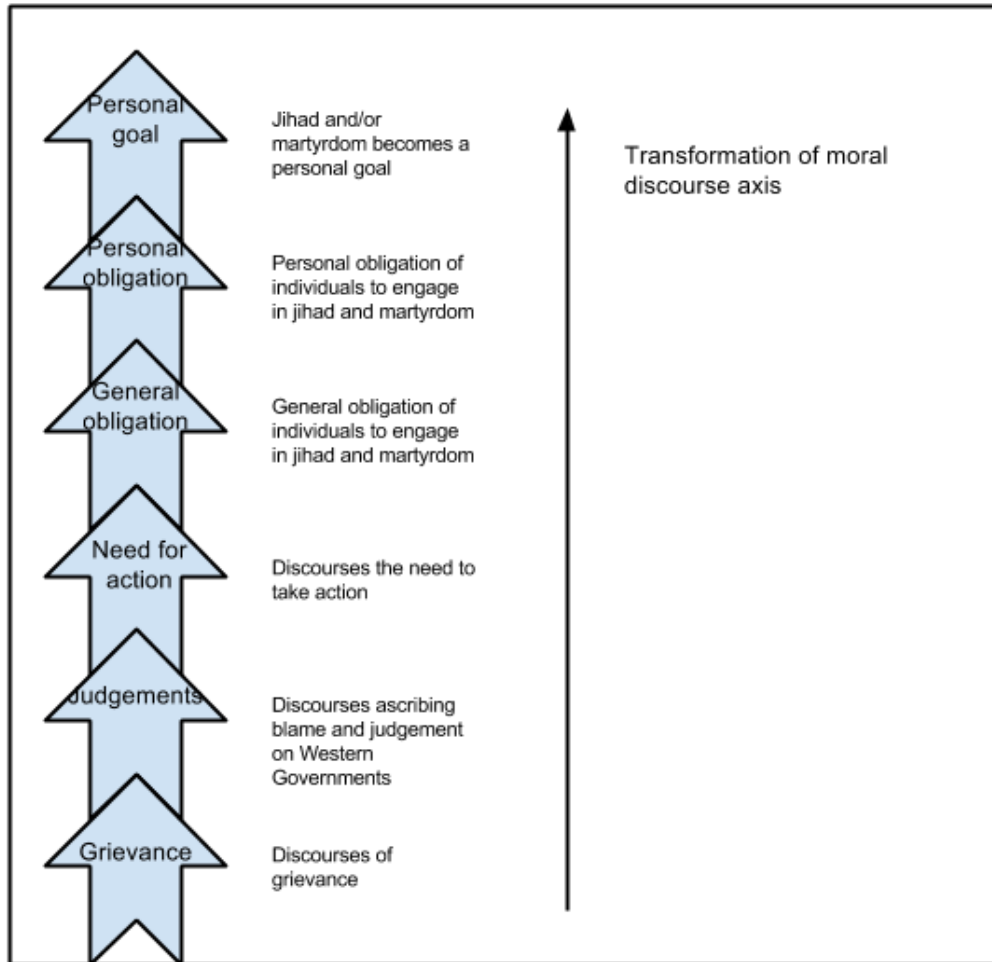


Figure 7- Transformation of moral discourse axis

Grievance is the first stage of moral discourse and has long been recognised as a fundamental aspect of radical Islam (Borum, 2011). Research has indicated that aspects of morality can be framed on being sympathetic to others (Tomasello & Vaish, 2013). Grievances in and of themselves do not provide a rationale for further action or progression in radicalisation. A person may read a story of innocent people being killed in a bombing that targeted a terrorist and easily justify the action by arguing that terrorists should not hide amongst civilians. Another person may be indifferent and yet another may be outraged. So why these different reactions and how can grievances be leveraged for radicalisation? The answer comes by referring this dependant variable back to the first stage of the independent variable on the moral authority axis - moral fracturing. Observations of individuals online found that when grievances were presented to those whose moral framework was fractured then it provided not only a powerful effect but more importantly a powerful connection point. Observations found that individuals could be morally fractured on a number of levels including bad personal experiences, anti-government sentiments and ascribing a sense of moral corruption to government as well as close connections to people who have been the victims of injustice. In others cases it is a disconnection from society and a connection with Islam where these grievances are then taken on. For these individuals, grievances are a powerful leveraging tool for further progression.

Discourses of judgment or ascribing blame is the second stage of the moral discourse axis. These relate directly to the second stage of the moral authority axis where the causes of moral fracturing must be identified. However the truth of such causes is as Foucault (1997) states a discursive construction rather than an impartial judgement. Judgement was most often ascribed to Western governments and in particular the US and Israel as the key symbolic enemies. This discourse is dangerous especially when individuals in Western countries are either disillusioned with their situation under a Western government or hold anti-government sentiments. Such individuals were found to be very susceptible to discourses that ascribed blame to Western governments as the cause of many ills. These first two stages are very similar to the four stages of Borum's (2003) model. However, there is more discourse needed to effect a moral transformation.

An individual can be moved by grievance and have a clear sense of judgement and yet not moved to violent action. Instead they may embrace non violent and/or political forms of action or no action at all. Hence the third stage of the need for action is critical. A critical point needs to be made here. An individual will only accept the type of action that falls within their realm of moral authority. In other words, an individual will only accept the need for more extreme forms of action if the truth of radical discourse is accepted. This means individuals must be willing to follow the group social norms (Tomasello & Vaish, 2013). However as indicated above, this first needs a moral redirection towards Allah and the highly selective texts of the Quran and Hadith used to construct the idea that radical discourse is the real truth of Islam and forms the basis of social norms. The socialisation process is especially important at this point especially issues of meaning, belonging and identity. This will be further detailed in the subsequent section. Also important is the fact that embracing the need for violent action is a time sensitive process and dependant on the effectiveness of the transformation of moral authority to Allah and more specifically to the constructed truth of radical discourses.

The fourth stage is the discourse of general obligation of jihad and martyrdom These are often presented as two narratives yet they are very much intertwined and interwoven concepts. Social roles have been found to be an essential aspect of morality which is more than just a static concept (Harper, 2009). Once an individual accepts that radical Islam is the true Islam then they are exposed to narratives of the general obligation of every muslim to engage in jihad and martyrdom. Radical Islam presents jihad and martyrdom as very much interwoven and progressive concepts and observations indicated that at the general obligation level there was a high level of acceptance with many praising and honouring the actions of martyrs. This stage also resonates strongly with the discourse/authority nexus with discourses reinforcing the authority of texts and narratives and visa versa.

Stage five see's a discursive transformation from a general obligation to a personal obligation to jihad and martyrdom. Observations indicated that while there were a large number of radicals who supported the general obligation to jihad and martyrdom, there were much fewer who accepted this as a personal obligation. There were also others who accepted the personal obligation of jihad but not martyrdom. Essentially, it is the how well the social institution can work in moving an individual to this stage. This will be discussed in the next section.

The final stage sees the discursive transformation from a personal obligation to undertake jihad and/or martyrdom to a personal goal. Observations of social media posts indicated that when individuals had internalised the discourses of jihad and or martyrdom as a personal goal, they expressed it as such on social media. Especially significant was the personal goal or desire for martyrdom following an acceptance of one's personal obligation to undertake jihad and be not only prepared for martyrdom but to actively seek it. Observations also confirmed that while a number of radicals expressed a belief in the personal obligation of jihad in particular, there were much fewer who expressed this as an actual goal. Again this is where the institutionalised socialisation is critical and will now be discussed.

Institutionalised socialisation

The third part of this model that needs expanding is the key mechanism for moving an individual through the stages to become radicalised and that is institutionalised socialisation. Each of these two key words needs further expansion.

First, the online environment becomes an institution where individuals are embedded within an 'apparatus of power' (Foucault, 2006, p. 2) and consequently become focused on radicalised discourses and isolated from undermining and/or competing discourses. An important distinction also needs to be made at this point in that being institutionalised may conjure up images of being forced into a mental hospital, a prison or even a school; this form of social media institutionalisation is voluntary and meets certain needs in terms of moral connections and making sense of a fractured world as discussed under the transformation of moral authority axis. Research data clearly reflected this with choice of material and connections all limited to those who share the same or similar beliefs. A closer institutionalised parallel would be that of a monastery where an individual chooses to go to undertake a spiritual or transformative journey.

Secondly, the term socialisation is an important aspect and includes a multitude of factors conceptualised in Figure 8 as multifactorial bubbles. Using the model from Veldhuis and Staun (2009) factors are classified as personal, social and macro factors. Some of the factors found through observation are listed in Figure 8. However, this is by no means a comprehensive list of factors rather a very small subset of the many factors that can influence any given person's socialisation. Furthermore, the conceptualisation of bubbles indicates that certain factors may play little significance in socialisation for one person and yet play a major role in the socialisation of others. In general, the macro factors were found to be much more applicable to the socialisation of most individuals online. In particular the Syrian revolution and the formation of the Islamic State; and most importantly, the opportunities presented for radicals by these events. As an example of the way this

multifactorial approach works, the progression from the need for action to general and personal obligations were found to not only be related to the strength of a person’s identity but also their sense of belonging. On this point, narrative discourses on aspects such as the brotherhood of jihad and the mujahideen were related to a sense of belonging and warrior symbolic imagery. The aim is to target and embed a person’s identity not only within radical jihad but also with a personalised obligation and goal to undertake such actions.

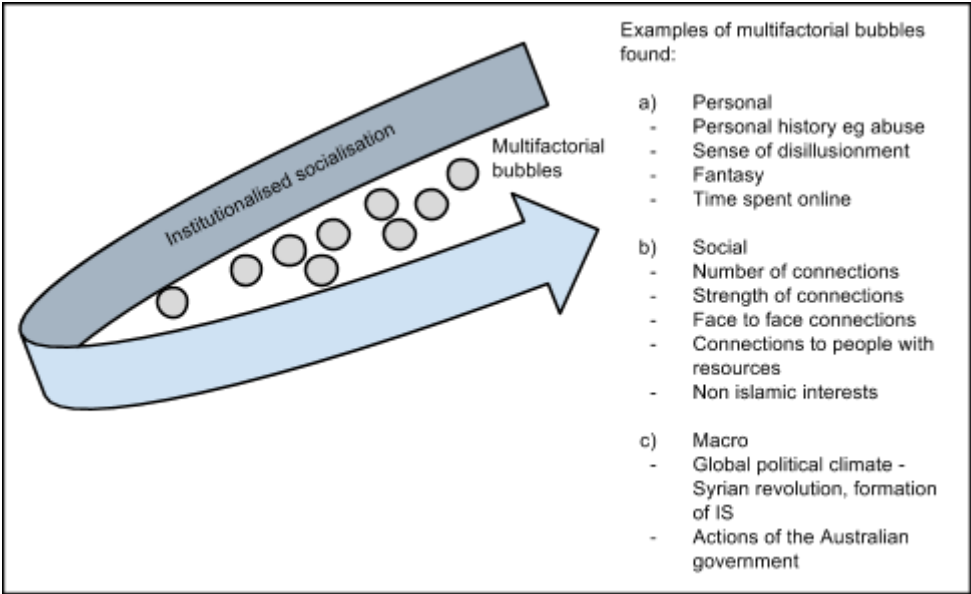


Figure 8 - Expansion of Institutionalised socialisation

Socialisation is a two dimensional process and includes socialisation by others as well as by the individual. In others words, observations indicated that individuals actually sought out radical discourses and materials such as YouTube video but were also exposed to these from their connections on their personal or group pages. In his work of technologies of the self, Foucault (1997) terms this process subjectification where individuals are both subject to forms of discourses as well as subject themselves to certain forms of discourse. In other words, an individual who wished to transform themselves will put themselves in the best (institutionalised) context that they can in order to best undergo this process of socialisation.

An important implication also arises at this point. As mentioned, many individuals will only be partially radicalised and hold for example to a belief in a general obligation to jihad and/or martyrdom but resist the idea of personally undertaking such actions. While these particular individuals may pose no direct security threat and not be an issue for law enforcement authorities, there is another factor that needs consideration here. These individuals are part of a network, an apparatus of power promoting radical discourses. Observations confirmed that often these individuals were quite vocal and active in reproducing radical discourses essentially narrowing their action to a media form of jihad.

A final point needs to be made about institutionalised socialisation and that is the importance of not limiting this process to the social media or online environment. Research by Helfstein (2012) found that in the majority of cases, some form of face to face contact was necessary for further action. The cases of lone wolf terrorists isolated from the world and radicalised solely online are quite rare (Helfstein, 2012). A research case study of the Syrian martyrs tracked from pre-radicalisation to martyrdom indicated clearly that these individuals were not socially isolated, yet they were institutionalised in terms of their associations being limited to those sharing similar (although some less radical) beliefs.

CONCLUSION

Socialisation is a critical aspect of this model that occurs within an online institution in which an individual is isolated and have their morality reframed through a series of interactions between moral authority and moral discourses. Both these axis progress through a series of stages where the discourses can only be internalised when an individual accepts the moral authority of the sources of these discourses. Particularly important is the moral fracturing that individuals have which allow their morality to be reframed. The model also acknowledges the multitude of contextual factors that guide the socialisation process.

Through a better understanding of how individuals are radicalised online with a focus on morality, it is hoped that better intervention strategies that address this can be implemented at the community level. Addressing moral

fracturing of disengaged individuals without leading to extremism will be a key role of Muslim leaders and youth leaders who can better regain the needed moral authority to protect the vulnerable from extremist recruiters.

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