

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340600260>

# Rational Radicalisation? A Case Study on the Psychological and Sociological Perspectives on the Radicalisation Process of a British Muslim.

Article · January 2017

DOI: 10.25609/sure.v3.2491

CITATIONS

0

READS

69

1 author:



Abigail Pickard

Aston University

7 PUBLICATIONS 12 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



EDULIA | Bringing down barriers to children's Healthy eating [View project](#)

# Rational Radicalisation? A Case Study on the Psychological and Sociological Perspectives on the Radicalisation Process of a British Muslim

Abigail Pickard  
University College Roosevelt  
Abbiepickard1@aol.com

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines existing psychological theories of radicalisation. An interview with a British second-generation Pakistani Muslim, arrested and charged with terrorism-related offences after attempting to join IS, was applied to two existing theories of radicalisation. The results indicated that a lack of identity, a strive for significance, social and group processes, and perceived discrimination and victimisation were the most important factors in the participant's radicalisation process. Overall, the paper concludes that certain aspects of each theory do not always appear to be present and it is important that models of radicalisation encompass more variables as interactional rather than chronological processes.

## Keywords

Muslim, British, radicalisation, terrorism, extremism.

## INTRODUCTION

850 British citizens are believed to have joined IS in the Middle East, with almost half of them returning to the UK (BBC News, 2017). Within the UK, areas in the North West such as Bradford and Leeds in Yorkshire, have large Muslim populations and are also known for increased violence and extremism (Bangs & Kaya, 2006). Muslim integration and radicalisation are possibly indirectly linked after reviewing statistics on recent terrorist activity and attacks in Europe (Rabasa & Benard, 2015). Rabasa and Benard (2015) showed that most terrorist acts in Europe were conducted by second-generation British Muslims of Pakistani descent.

Sociological and psychological factors appear to play an important role in radicalisation, and it appears important to address these possible explanations in a real-life context (Newman, 2006). Consequently, this thesis will address the topic of radicalisation and a collection of psychological and sociological theories in answering the research question, 'how can the radicalisation process of a British Muslim be explained using psychological and sociological theories?'

'Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted under the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution Share Alike (CC BY-SA) license and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page''  
SRC 2016, November 30, 2016, The Netherlands

Moghaddam (2005) developed the Staircase model to illustrate how individuals, who respond to macro-changes through violence, are, in a psychological sense, calculated actors retorting to increasingly restricted degrees of freedom in their social environment. Moghaddam (2005) likens the process of radicalisation to six floors of a staircase. The ground floor begins with a sense of objective or subjective deprivation when an individual compares their material conditions with those of other groups. If one feels that there is a lack of social mobility or procedural justice they are likely to progress onto the second floor, with a displacement of

aggression. Moghaddam (2005) believes that at this level, instead of directing the aggression towards the true cause of inequality, the aggression is placed upon a specific target group. These individuals may then start to consider violent or radical decisions to counter the inequality, progressing to the third floor, in which they morally justify extreme and violent actions. At the fourth floor, there is a solidification of categorical thinking and the perceived legitimacy of the organisation. The solidification is established through intergroup isolation and intragroup affiliation, establishing the 'Us vs Them' identity. The final floor involves the suppression of inhibitory mechanisms, such as the belief in not hurting another person, often through obedience and conformity to the in-group, ultimately leading the individual to commit a terrorist act.

Kruglanski and colleagues (2014), outlined a model of radicalisation founded on the belief that the search for personal significance creates a major motivational force, which pushes individuals towards terrorist behaviour. Through empirical evidence, they believe that the quest for personal significance, the ideological component that views the means of violence as appropriate, and the social processes such as networking and the dynamics of a group are significant forces in the process of radicalisation. Revenge is an important aspect in the Quest for Significance because, the inclination to harm those they have been harmed by, appears to allow an individual to restore one's lost significance (Kruglanski, Gelfand, Bélanger, Sheveland, Hetiarachchi, & Gunaratna, 2014). Hence, the process underlying Kruglanski's theory is based on three important steps, which are believed to be activated by specific events/experiences, notably: (1) the arousal of the significance goal/activation of the Quest for Significance, (2) identifying violence/terrorism as an appropriate means to achieve significance, and finally (3) a shift in one's commitment to the goal of significance, in that other goals incompatible with terrorism are devaluated.

## METHOD

I conducted a semi-structured individual interview with a British Islamic Extremist of second generation Pakistani background. Since research indicates that it is important for the interviewee to create their own narrative, I asked very open questions based on concepts of Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1988). I then analysed the interview based on a priori theories regarding his process of radicalisation, using the qualitative data software NVivo. These theories were then evaluated and addressed with regards to their relevance and applicability to a first-hand account of radicalisation.

## RESULTS

The interviewee, Hisham<sup>1</sup>, was a 29-year-old male, living with his parents and brother in West Yorkshire, Great Britain. His parents were both from Pakistan and moved to England in their late twenties. Hisham has lived with his family in the same house since he was born and went to the local state-funded secondary school. He has a brother three years his

<sup>1</sup> Name has been changed for anonymity

senior, who grew up in the same household and attended the same school. At the age of 16, Hisham left high-school and began working for his father as a chauffeur, alongside several temporary occupations. In November 2015, he was arrested by the police and held in custody for approximately 36 hours after the police revealed that he was under investigation for terrorist activity. He was questioned about his activities, involving travel plans to go to Syria and communicating with other British citizens that had joined the terrorist group IS. Upon trial, Hisham was found not guilty of attempting to join a terrorist organisation and disseminating terrorist material. Hisham was, however, found guilty of possessing records likely to be used in terrorism, to which he received a ten-month suspended jail sentence and home arrest.

When asked to give a small introduction, Hisham was somewhat unsure of how to present himself, by stating that he had “not got much to say”. Hisham spoke a lot about his family, indicating that he is close with his family members and that they were influential in his decision to go to Syria. He also mentioned that his “mum wished that [he] had [gone] to Kirklees College”, as his older brother had. Hisham even indicated that his parents favoured his brother and stated: “when [my brother] was 22 my parents sent him out to Pakistan and that’s where he found [sister-in-law]”. In the interview, Hisham mentioned his brother seven times and never referred to anything negative, solely his brother’s achievements. When asked about his performance in school he uttered that his grades “weren’t that good”, stating “I just left school at 16 coz I was done with that [sic]”. To present his strengths in relation to his brother Hisham mentioned that his brother is smarter but he is stronger.

On several occasions, Hisham implies that through joining the terrorist organisation, he is being courageous and instilling pride and honour on himself and his family. When asked how his parents would feel if he went to fight in Syria, Hisham claimed: “she’d see it was for the best and probably be proud for me [sic]”. He portrayed fighting for IS in a positive regard, stating that “it’s a very brave decision”.

Throughout the entire interview, he only referred to Pakistan three times, but did use the derogatory term ‘Paki’ twice to refer to himself; “they see that I’m Paki [sic]”. He did not identify with being English or British, solely mentioning that he was born in the country. Hisham did, however, refer to holding a Muslim identity on six occasions during the interview and used the word Muslim 21 times in the interview. Hisham explained that during his adolescence, he did not wish to be associated with Islam and was not a practising Muslim. After finishing secondary school, he began practising Islam, through praying and attending Mosque. He identified only two major categories at his high school, Muslim and White, which he implies are mutually exclusive.

Frequently throughout the interview, he utilised the term “we” when speaking both about Muslims living in Britain, but also with other ‘radical’ individuals supporting IS. He mentioned IS seven times during the interview and explicitly used the collective terms “we” and “us” to refer to them thirteen times. Social comparison is evident in Hisham’s referral to groups that hold a negative attitude towards Muslims. Included in the ‘out-group’ that are against Muslims, are the British Government and the police, which Hisham believes are perpetuating prejudice and hatred towards Muslim groups. Hisham indicated that he lacked societal support and suffered prejudice, from the main groups that were supposed to help, such as the educational system and the criminal system. However, Hisham did use the word ‘help’ to describe the action of his peers who aided him in travelling to Syria, saying “they were also gonna help me” and “he was helping us over

Facebook”.

His personal experiences with racism and racial violence are evidenced through his anecdotes of his time at high school. When talking about the police, he believes he is heavily discriminated against for being of Pakistani origin, and he uses the profanity ‘fuck’ on several occasions to illustrate his perceived treatment from the police. In response to his arrest for terrorism charges he stated he “was fucked”. Throughout the interview, Hisham reiterated that he should be allowed to do what he wanted, stating “I think I should be allowed to do what I want but you just can’t in this country”.

However, the worst form of discrimination that Hisham experiences appear to be in the form of anti-Muslim groups, specifically the English Defence League (EDL). The anger that Hisham feels towards the targeted out-group of Anti-Muslim groups is evident in his use of strong language and profanities: “like that fucking English defence march last year”. At three explicit points in the interview, Hisham denoted violence and in particular the justification for violence towards specific populations. Hisham differentiates the use of violence between the individuals that are racist towards Muslims and those who are not. He indicates that he does not approve of terrorising people who do not show racism or hate towards minorities.

Hisham did not perceive himself as a terrorist nor as a radicalised Muslim, but he did state that he “may be a bit radical”. On several occasions, he illustrates how terrorism is a mental schema associated with criminals, fear and hurting people, which is why he does not wish to be classed as a terrorist himself.

## DISCUSSION

Contradictory to the findings of Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor (2015), as a British Muslim, Hisham should identify with several different groups and thus when asked to describe himself he would have elaborated upon his national identity, race, ethnic origins, political views, Islamic belief, and religious practices. Hisham’s lack of identity resonates with the comments of Husain (as cited by Rabasa & Bernard, 2015), that radical Islamists often struggle to identify with both Pakistani identity and values and British values and identity.

Research indicates that by Hisham establishing a Muslim identity, he is attempting to construct a positive social identity and meaning, which appears to be lacking in his past (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Moghaddam, 2005). Hisham indicated that for him being English and being Muslim are two exclusive categories, thus if he does not identify with being English he must identify with the Muslim identity. Hisham may be striving for a sense of significance that was mentioned by Kruglanski and colleagues (2014). Hisham’s belief that his parents would be proud of him for joining IS, also indicates a strong search for achievement and recognition. Moghaddam (2005) argues that holding this sense of pride for one’s actions is one of the crucial processes in radicalisation.

It appears that the socialisation process was one of the first steps to occur as he officially joined his group of friends and then adopted Islam to go along with the group norms, which corresponds with researchers that often ideology and religion are not the main reason for becoming involved in extremist groups (Bakker, 2006). Hisham emphasised the importance of group belonging, which many scholars believe is essential in the process of radicalisation, through conforming to the actions and behaviours of fellow group members (Sageman, 2008). Research has suggested that, through taking on a collective identity, newcomers such as Hisham, may lose a

sense of their unique personal characteristics and values, in an effort to embrace the group's identity (Sklad & Park, forthcoming). According to Balch and Taylor's Social Drift Model (1977) even if an individual is initially unwilling to commit themselves to a specific group, they may justify the group's behaviour to avoid deviating from the group's norms. This appears in Hisham's justification of violence towards the out-group because they "deserve it" and it is believed to lead to his gradual dedication to the group, shown in his willingness to possibly be killed fighting for IS.

One of the aspects evident in Hisham's discourse is his moral outrage, which is a cognitive factor important in the radicalisation (Moghaddam, 2005). Hisham made several remarks that attune with the difficulties of being a second-generation immigrant and feeling a lack of societal support. Thus, it can be argued that Hisham saw his group members and other radicals as accommodating and supportive, which contrasts the image he had of the British society.

Much of the included literature supports the idea that discrimination or perceived victimisation is one of the most important factors in radicalisation (Merton, 1968). Sageman (2008) posited that perceived discrimination and victimisation were the first processes of radicalisation, which corresponds with the discrimination and racial abuse Hisham felt throughout his adolescence.

Both the self-fulfilling prophecy projected from his parents and the stereotype threat projected from society, provide a labelling theoretical analysis of how Hisham's choice to join IS is largely due to the negative label he held, being from a minority group. He did not solely receive racial abuse and stereotyping from his peers, but also from the wider society. Hisham felt especially prejudiced by the law enforcement, believing he was suffering from what Merton (1968) termed criminal victimisation. Such feelings of victimisation and sense of discrimination may then lead to a perceived opposition between the in-group and the out-group (Moghaddam, 2005).

The main violence and racial hatred he experienced were from right-wing anti-migrant groups, such as the English Defense League. This discrimination leads individuals, such as Hisham, to take their own measures in weakening the out-group. On several occasions, Hisham mentioned that the out-group, alias "the Muslim haters", must face some consequence for their actions. The 'Us vs. Them' approach that Hisham holds is an important factor in defining the referent object of terrorists. Theorists believe that this categorisation of 'Us vs Them' may lead to the dehumanisation of out-group members, which Hisham sees as all anti-Muslim groups and the politicians (Moghaddam, 2005).

It is not only the construction of terrorism that influenced the radicalisation of Hisham, but also the sense of restriction and the fact that he is forbidden from travelling to Syria that makes him more determined to join IS. Reactance theory dictates that suppression and restrictive measures enhance the temptation of doing something, and in radical movements such as IS, individuals who actively disobey the law are considered heroes or role models (Brehm, 1981).

## Suggestions

Several aspects of Hisham's radicalisation process are covered in Moghaddam's and Kruglanski's models of radicalisation, but there still appears to be important factors unaddressed. One of the processes that appears prevalent in the process of radicalisation, reactance to society, has been relatively neglected by the existing models. Secondly, the two models of radicalisation address the importance of

discrimination and victimisation in the path to extremism. However, these models do not address a more generic clash of cultural and religious values for individuals from different backgrounds. It seems important to develop more specific models that address cultural struggles in a multicultural society, such as the UK. Hisham recognises that he has consistently faced difficulties in creating an identity in a society that recognises white individuals as being more British. This may be classed as discrimination when the treatment is externalised and Hisham is treated in a specific way because of his racial and ethnic background. However, the internalised feelings that Hisham feels, that he neither belongs to the Pakistani culture nor the British culture is a significant factor for his development towards extremist actions.

Finally, with both aforementioned models of radicalisation one of the most inherent flaws appears to be the chronicity that the academics posit. Several of the processes mentioned in the theories also appear in the experiences of Hisham, such as the justification of violence, the perceived discrimination, the socialisation, and the 'Us vs. Them' mentality. However, these models posit that these processes occur in sequential processes, which do not correspond with the findings of the case study. For example, Hisham appears to have held the 'Us vs. Them' construct from a very young age, when he describes the constant division between the 'Muslims' and the 'White' children. It is not until the fourth floor of Moghaddam's staircase to terrorism (2005) that the 'Us vs. Them' attitude is believed to develop. This chronicity appears flawed when reviewing the experiences of Hisham, who first joined a group to remain close with his friends and then through his friends was introduced to Islamic ideologies. Consequently, the factors involved in the radicalisation process should not be placed in a specific order but rather outlined as processes that may be interactional rather than sequential.

Despite working with these models to incorporate the above-mentioned processes in a British Muslims radicalisation, there also appear several suggestions that may be made to prevent the process of radicalisation in Second Generation British Muslim. Firstly, it seems important that the sense of discrimination and prejudice that emanates from society and the British government needs to be addressed. With an increased rise of populism and right-wing politics in the UK, it is necessary to change the discourse towards individuals of different racial backgrounds. Being born and raised in Britain, Hisham is a British citizen, but he felt consistently labelled as a 'Paki'. This labelling makes it incredibly difficult for Hisham to identify himself as being British and accepting the British values and culture, seen in the fact that he labels himself a 'Paki'. Consequently, individuals such as Hisham could feel more integrated if their British nationality was properly addressed. However, it may be argued that in trying to force a British identity and British values and cultures upon second generation migrants, such individuals take rebellious measures and adopt an extreme stance against these values. Therefore, it is important that society and the government conduct further research to identify the best methods of integrating whilst also recognising and assimilation the values and culture of migrants.

A further suggestion that resonates throughout this research is that society must do more and provide more effective means for all individuals. Hisham appeared to hold the idea that the government favoured highly academic, middle-upper class, white British citizens and as such provided lots of opportunities and resources to this group. Merton (1968) indicated that income inequality and chronic unemployment are anomie strains, which often lead to deviant behaviour.

This finding appears particularly pertinent in Hisham's situation because he feels he lacks the resources and methods to fulfil his sense of achievement. He was not fond of academics and struggled to find full-time employment, which one is lead to believe are the most important goals and achievements. As such, Hisham turned to the drastic measures of joining a militant group to fulfil a sense of achievement. If the government and society could provide Hisham with alternative means to develop and attain this personal significance, Hisham could have avoided having to take such extreme measures.

### Limitations

There are two main limitations to this research, which must be considered. Firstly, as with much case-study based research, the findings are strictly limited to the specific individual. Although Hisham may follow several of the outlined processes of radicalisation, this is the account of one individual and when examining other radical individuals, they may have followed very different processes of radicalisation. This also links into the second limitation, that through positioning theory each individual ultimately has their own experiences and world views, so no two individuals can possibly have had the same experiences. Therefore, all the conclusions that I make about Hisham's life are inherently biased to my social standing. I will never fully comprehend the difficulties and experiences that Hisham has experienced, and as such, I may present an inaccurate representation of his process to Islamic extremism.

### CONCLUSION

This research indicates that certain aspects of Kruglanski and colleagues' Model of Radicalisation (2014), and Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism (2005) can be applied to the interviewee's radicalisation, with some models such as Moghaddam's (2005), being more supported than others. It appears that social and group processes were the initial stages in Hisham adopting radical beliefs and ideologies, which also coincided with a sense of discrimination and victimisation. Furthermore, moral outrage, as illustrated by Sageman (2008), and criminal victimisation (Merton, 1968) were present factors in the case study's adoption of radical ideologies. This finding indicates the necessity of revising or possibly adapting the models to include other important processes. The research also indicates that the radicalisation of a British Muslim does not follow the outlined chronicity of the proposed models and may occur in a different order. Finally, the process of radicalisation appears to be an interplay of factors, such as perceived discrimination, striving for an identity, a need for group belonging, and personal achievement.

The psychological theories regarding the process of radicalisation allow for an understanding and application of specific case studies, such as the one presented above. However, these theories must be used as a foundation for the aspects to examine for an individual's radicalisation process, in order to fully assess all the factors and influences involved. Furthermore, the findings from this specific individual demonstrate that wider acceptance of different ethnic, cultural and religious minorities could remove influential factors to developing radical beliefs and extremist behaviours.

### ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Abigail Pickard was an undergraduate student, majoring in psychology and law at University College Roosevelt. The primary and secondary research was proposed and carried out by the student to fulfil her honour's thesis requirement, under the supervision of Dr Eri Park.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Dr Eri Park, for the continuous support in my studies, as well as for her motivation, patience, and immense knowledge. I am also extremely grateful to Dr Zach Warren, for his advice and aid throughout this research project. A whole hearted thank you is extended to my research participant, for his help with data collection and I wish him much success for the future.

### REFERENCES

1. Bakker, E. (2006). *Jihadi terrorists in Europe*. Den Haag: Netherlands Institute of International Relations.
2. Balch, R. W., & Taylor, D. (1977). Seekers and saucers: the role of the cultic milieu in joining a UFO cult. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 20(6), 839-860.
3. Bangs, M., & Kaya, M. (2006). Crime in England and Wales: Quarterly Update to December 2005. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 06/06, Home Office, 27 April 2006.
4. BBC News. (2017). *Who are Britain's jihadists?*. BBC. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-32026985>
5. Brehm, S. S. (1981). Oppositional behavior in children: A reactance theory approach. *Developmental social psychology: Theory and research*, 96-121.
6. Glaser, B. G. (1998). *Doing Grounded Theory - Issues and Discussions*. Mill Valley: Sociology Press.
7. Kruglanski, A., Gelfand, M., Bélanger, J., Sheveland, A., Hetiarachchi, M., & Gunaratna, R. (2014). The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism. *Political Psychology*, 35, 69-93. doi:10.1111/pops.12163
8. Merton, R. K. (1968). *Social theory and social structure*. Simon and Schuster.
9. Moghaddam, F. M. (2005). The staircase to terrorism: a psychological exploration. *American Psychologist*, 60(2), 161-182. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.60.2.161
10. Newman, E. (2006). Exploring the "Root Causes" of Terrorism. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29(8), 749-772, doi:10.1080/10576100600704069
11. Rabasa, A., & Benard, C. (2015). *Eurojihad*. London, UK: Cambridge University Press.
12. Sageman, M. (2008). A strategy for fighting international Islamist terrorists. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 618(1), 223-231.
13. Scott-Baumann, A., & Cheruvallil-Contractor, S. (2015). *Islamic Education in Britain: New Pluralist Paradigms*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.
14. Tajfel, H. (1974). Social identity and intergroup behaviour. *Information (International Social Science Council)*, 13(2), 65-93.
15. Sklad, M. & Park, E. (2016). *Examining the Potential Role of Education in the Prevention of Radicalization*. Manuscript submitted for publication.