
Adjusting Our Gaze: An Alternative Approach to Understanding Youth Radicalization

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Adjusting Our Gaze: An Alternative Approach to Understanding Youth Radicalization

Abstract

The article intends to provide an alternative perspective to examine the radicalization process. It rejects the causal paradigm in favor of a discursive approach that focuses on understanding psychological phenomena as revealed in discourse. My central argument is that a discursive approach offers greater explanatory power than is offered by the causal, reductionist approach that currently dominates the field. My article concludes by offering an interdisciplinary framework that uses discursive psychology as a mode of explanation to better understand how radicalization may occur at the individual level in various sociocultural contexts as a product of *lived experience*. The framework employs positioning theory as an analytic tool to examine discursive exchanges to provide insight into pathways to the development of radical belief systems among at-risk youth.

Introduction

The radicalization of at-risk youth populations across global cultural communities has led to the creation of a pool of candidates vulnerable to recruitment by extremist organizations seeking to establish their version of a utopian society. In some parts of the world, the radicalization problem has been exacerbated by the marginalization of youth disillusioned by the lack of economic and political opportunities. In the Middle East, youth face the paradox of having expanded access to education only to learn upon graduation that many will be unable to find jobs.¹ Meanwhile, a small minority of violent extremists reject all forms of political engagement with established authority, and view the replacement of the current system with one conforming to their worldview.

Still other youths around the world grow up in cultural environments where family and community narratives support beliefs that might be considered radical by others outside of their particular milieu. In this sense, radicalization may be more properly understood as a type of indoctrination. Within this context, a child is subjected to a rote learning style to inculcate a specific set of unchallengeable beliefs in order to establish a personal commitment to a narrow interpretation of an ideology that can be translated into disciplined action.

In Europe, second and third generation Muslim youth face the challenge of trying to negotiate multiple identities across ethnic, social, and religious dimensions. It has complicated the way they situate themselves in their particular societies. Muslim youth are confronted with the task of measuring the narrative of “the good Muslim” against “life in a secular nation-state against a backdrop of tensions between Muslim youth and their traditional parents.”² Meanwhile, these tasks are undertaken within the context of an unfolding developmental process in which Muslim youth are seeking to establish stable personal and collective identities. For some, the path towards finding a stable identity in the midst of an often hostile sociocultural environment has led them to accept radical interpretations of Islam that provide them with a personal sense of safety, security, and self-worth.

Each child will encounter a unique set of challenges at a critical developmental period in life. Whether confronting radicalizing cultural

¹ Navtej Dhillon, Paul Dyer and Tarik Yousef, “Generation in Waiting: An Overview of School to Work and Family Formation Transitions,” in *Generation in Waiting: The Unfulfilled Promise of Young People in the Middle East* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 11-33.

² Tahir Abbas, “Introduction: Islamic Political Radicalism in Western Europe,” in *Islamic Political Radicalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 3-4.

narratives or pursuing a personal and collective identity, youth must navigate through a myriad of life choices. It is little wonder that the approaches seeking to find an underlying set of root causes that claim to account for radicalization and terrorism across cultures yield contradictory and ambiguous results.

Generally, many scholars theorize about radicalization from a narrow Western perspective.³ These studies all seem to yearn for the discovery of a set of universal principles that could shed light on the essential nature of radicalization, but in the process reveal that their methodologies may be inappropriate to the task of understanding behavior as lived experience within a particular cultural context. This typical Western, data-driven approach highlights another unfortunate feature of many efforts to study radicalization.⁴

Terrorism scholar John Horgan reflects the frustration in the current state of radicalization and terrorism research asserting that:

“A legacy of the reductionist approaches to understanding terrorist behavior is not only confusion about what a psychology of terrorism implies, but also the realization that even some of the simplest analyses of terrorists produce inconsistent and confusing uses of psychological findings.”⁵

Horgan argues for an interdisciplinary approach and suggests that researchers should begin to think in terms of “pathways” instead of “profiles” and “root causes” when seeking to understand terrorist behavior.⁶

The analytic challenge in understanding the radicalization process is identifying an approach that can be used to understand psychological phenomena of developing youth within their own cultural context. This must be done in a way that allows the analyst to gain insight on how the lives of affected youth (pathways) unfold as they confront various narratives resident in the social structures that are nurturing their development. While a causal approach may at best describe what may be happening at a particular point in time, it has been unable to provide insight into psychological phenomena of individuals embedded in a constantly changing cultural context. This article contends that focusing analytic attention on discursive practices will offer a critical window into understanding individuals as they subjectively experience their lives embedded within their particular culture. Through an examination of their lived experience as revealed in the various modalities of discourse,

³ Mina al-Lami, “Studies of Radicalisation: State of the Field Report,” in *Centre for Global and Transnational Politics* 11 (2009): 2-10.

⁴ Tinka Veldius and Jorgen Staun, “Islamic Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model,” *Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael* (2008): 9-10.

⁵ John Horgan, “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology and Radicalization into Terrorism,” *The Annals of the Academy of the Political and Social Sciences* 618 (2008): 80-94.

⁶ *Ibid.*

analysts will better understand life trajectories where narrow arrays of life options funnel individuals towards more radicalized belief systems. A discursive approach brings us into the life of the individual as someone who experiences it personally across time.

Importance of Cultural Context

Most of the research on radicalization and militant extremism has neglected to examine the interaction between cultural context and an individual's cognitive development, which combine to continually reshape the individual's worldview. An individual's worldview ultimately determines their life trajectory. As Valsiner notes, "all human beings are said to belong to society—or societies. Yet they do so in different ways..."⁷ An individual is not only embedded in society, but society is also embedded in the individual, in a way that is personalized and unique. From an analytical standpoint, culture must be taken into account in order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the radicalization process and the pathways that may lead individuals toward extremist behavior.

Geertz's ethnographic approach, which sought to establish how inhabitants of a particular culture socially constructed their own reality via events, rituals and ideas, became known as "thick Description." Geertz reminds us of the complexity of trying to understand another culture through thick description by insightfully noting that "what we call our data is really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to."⁸

The Legacy of the Natural Science Model

The ambiguous and often contradictory results that have emerged from the radicalization and terrorism research dominated by a causal approach highlights an even deeper issue regarding the nature of explanations when it comes to gaining insight into human behavior. The application of the causally-based natural science model to the investigation of psychological phenomena has led to a number of problematic assumptions, raising questions concerning the validity of research in social psychology, and its applicability in a cross-cultural context. This has obvious implications when assessing the validity of radicalization and terrorism research, particularly across cultures.

⁷ Jaan Valsiner, *Culture in Minds and Societies: Foundations of Cultural Psychology* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007), 87.

⁸ Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6-9.

A major obstacle that hampers the meaningful scientific investigation of radicalization as a context-sensitive and culture-inclusive process has been the dominance of a quantitatively oriented North American research paradigm in the social sciences. Toomela notes that while the North American approach has provided ways to statistically predict how one variable may predict another, the resulting fragments of data do not shed light on complicated underlying mechanisms that may be influencing the results. Statistical probabilistic prediction has become an end in itself, at the expense of trying to understand individual behavior within a particular cultural context over time.⁹ Finding regularities in patterns of data is not the same as explaining complex human behavior.

The emergence in the past several decades of the internationally-based and interdisciplinary-oriented field of cultural psychology has brought into relief many of the inadequacies of Western-dominated general psychology and the methodology it brings to bear in making claims about psychological universals. Norenzayan and Heine note that in the last two decades there have been numerous studies in cultural psychology that have demonstrated the inadequacies of generalizing psychological theories developed in the West to other cultural contexts.¹⁰ Geertz warned about the dangers of a “consensus gentium” approach in which social scientists become driven by the search for cross-cultural universals. Instead of rightly using analytic tools to assist in answering research questions, the toolkit determines what questions can be asked.

The Emergence of a New Paradigm

The rise of discursive psychology as a mode of explanation, which relies on a normative approach to explaining human behavior, represents a radical departure from the causally-based natural science paradigm. Its emergence in the last twenty years reflects the growing skepticism about the plausibility of claims of causal models in cognitive science that rely on “hidden” cognitive mechanisms to explain human thought and behavior. Utilizing a discursive approach—in which rules, duties, and obligations influence an individual’s life trajectory, and considering human behavior within a particular cultural context that is constantly changing—provides access to understanding human behavior as lived experience.

⁹ Jaan Valsiner, “Integrating Psychology with the Globalizing World: A Requiem to the Post-Modernist Experiment with Wissenschaft,” *Integrative and Psychological Behavioral Sciences* 43 (2009): 3.

¹⁰ Ara Norenzayan and Steven J. Heine, “Psychological Universals: What Are They and How Can We Know?” *Psychological Bulletin* 135 (2005): 763-784.

The discursive approach also has the advantage of accommodating the insights of narrative and the role of storytelling and its organizing role in structuring narratives that order ordinary life. Conceptualizing the flow of life events in terms of narrative directs attention to the individual's intentionality and judgement within continuously shifting situational contexts.¹¹ Language connects the individual to their sociocultural context by providing a way for the individual to establish meaning, even as far as establishing a separate realm of reality. For example, among the Taliban, "true night dreams" have the status and power of prophecy, i.e. these dreams are treated as an authoritative embodied voice that serves as a spiritual guide to actions. Language serves to translate the dream and, through social practice, fosters the acceptance of the dream as everyday reality. Consequently, a central concern of discourse analysis is how talking and text create social actions. Social actions are constructed from an array of linguistic and rhetorical resources that situate the individual in a particular sociocultural environment. Variations in the account(s) may provide revealing detail to gain insight into situational versions of a social action. In sum, a discursive approach provides the opportunity to gain insight into human behavior as embedded in a constantly changing sociocultural environment.

Discourse analysis is particularly useful for exploring the rhetorical dimension and organization of everyday conversation and internal thought processes that contribute to the generation and delineation of specific story lines. The ideas of persuasion and argumentation both play roles in the rhetorical process of structuring another person's perceptions (and hence the individual's social reality) that will generate an array of life choices available to the individual. Within the context of radicalization, one can easily see how the rhetorical dimension comes into play. For example, a knowledgeable Imam, well-versed in the Quran with finely-honed rhetorical skills, finds it easy to persuade a vulnerable youth who possesses few rhetorical skills and only a superficial understanding of the Quran. It is not a reasoned argument that serves to persuade the youth towards a more radical interpretation of Islam, but rather a final argument that the youth is unable to challenge or refute that consequently leads the youth to accept the only conceivable option as presented by the Imam.

The Developmental Dimension

¹¹ Harré, Rom, *The Singular Self: An Introduction to the Psychology of Personhood* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 30-32.

There is very little research that has looked at the radicalization of youth from a developmental perspective. LoCicero and Sinclair remind us that in assessing and analyzing youth involvement in terrorist activities, it is important to consider that youth conceive and interpret the world around them in ways that make them vulnerable to proximate sociocultural influences. The developmental context in which youth are nurtured will affect their fundamental capacities, including the development of their cognitive strategies that will guide them through life.¹² For example, youth who lack the cognitive complexity to effectively evaluate and challenge rhetorical arguments of an Imam seeking to direct them towards membership in a terrorist organization, will perceive a narrower range of options and may unquestioningly assume that no additional life choices will be available to them.

The Narrative Structure of Lived Experience

Human beings are constantly challenged to manage the chaotic flow of stimuli that washes over them. It constitutes the experiential feedstock used to fashion personal understandings of themselves and how they belong to their particular sociocultural environment. An important organizing principle to manage this flow of stimuli and transform it into understandable events and human action has been the structuring of lived experience as narrative.

Sarbin suggests that imposing structure on human experience through the use of narrative projects a very different approach than that offered by traditional psychology in that human thought and behavior can be viewed as being guided by

“our hopes, dreams, fears, fantasies, planning, memories, loving, hating, the rituals of daily life...all guided by narrative plots and are organized to tell the stories of the individual’s involved”.¹³

Narrative not only positions the self within a cultural context and organizes experience into meaningful events, it also has a critical temporal component that serves as a vehicle to transport the cultural values and beliefs that help constitute the social reality of future generations within a particular cultural community. This approach contrasts sharply with traditional psychology, which seeks to find causally-based predictable laws of behavior, which assume that human beings act according to a universally accepted logic.

¹² LoCicero, Alice and Samuel J. Sinclair, *Creating Martyrs: Conditions That Make Dying in a Terrorist Attack Seem Like a Good Idea* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 2-3.

¹³ Crossley, Michele L., *Introducing Narrative Psychology: Self, Trauma and the Construction of Meaning* (Buckingham (United Kingdom: Open University Press, 2000), 46-47.

An essential characteristic of narrative is its capacity to provide the basis for and interpretation of meaning within a particular cultural community. Among its many important functions, it can legitimize authority structures, as well as provide a means to interpret the norms and rules that guide individual behavior. In this sense, narrative serves to highlight deviations from canonically established sociocultural order. Within the context of radicalization, a group narrative establishes a standard of conformity in which an individual must decide to either leave the group or share in the doctrinally established group narrative.

Positioning Theory

Positioning theory is a theoretical and analytical model introduced by Harré and Langenhove in 1999 to attempt to understand psychological phenomena that are produced in the process of public and private discourse. It incorporates and relates three central elements that are fundamental to understanding the psychological and social acts of an individual within the person's cultural context; the person's position, discourse or speech acts, and storyline that represents a narrative generated by the person through dialogue.

Positioning theory breaks away from the traditional social psychological approach of understanding social activity within the context of assigned "roles" and contextualizes the concept of role by viewing it as a "position" with certain inherent qualities. Within positioning theory, a position represents on one hand a collection of rights and duties available to the person contingent on the social situation in which the discourse takes place. On the other hand, position also refers to potential attributes (psychological, social, moral, etc.) that locate the individual within a specific dialogic exchange. Positioning theory essentially takes the notion of "role" and particularizes it to a specific individual.¹⁴

It is within the various dialogic encounters that storylines are created and form the contextual narratives that make human action intelligible and provide a narrative context for future social action. While these dialogic encounters generate storylines that assist in establishing fixed meaning, they also provide a sense of human social action conceived as an "unfolding" process that is contingent and indeterminate, underscoring the

¹⁴ Rom Harré and Luk van Langenhove, "Introducing Positioning Theory," in *Positioning Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 14-19.

embeddedness of an individual in a particular cultural context that is constantly changing. In this sense, although an individual's position represents a set of beliefs that defines what actions are socially possible, the person's position is also ephemeral in that positions are re-negotiable in each dialogical encounter.¹⁵

The social force of relatively determinate speech acts will affect how a person positions himself and how that person is positioned by others in the conversation, which in turn impacts how the storyline is generated. The beliefs held by the participants in the conversation are a key element of determining the social power of the speech acts contained within the discursive exchange. It is within "positions" that beliefs reside in the form of rights, duties and obligations that help structure the social acts available to the person. In addition, positions also contain beliefs that reflect psychological, social, and moral attributes and dispositions that help establish the force of a social act. In this sense, speech acts do not cause behavior but are evaluated within a normative context by the participants according to the beliefs of the individuals that serve to sequence the speech acts in a way that forms a storyline. It is through relatively determinate speech acts that storylines begin to congeal and become coherent. There is no predetermined storyline, but rather the unfolding of storylines during the course of a discursive exchange. The triad also assists in gaining greater clarity on how people are repositioned during the course of a conversation as storylines are generated and positions are reevaluated and acted upon.¹⁶

Among the various modes of positioning arrangements the most basic distinction is made between first order positioning and second order positioning. First order positioning is the process of locating oneself and others within a particular moral space utilizing categories and developing storylines that situate the participants within the context of the conversation. Second order positioning refers to a situation in which first order positioning is challenged, and a repositioning occurs.¹⁷

A distinction is also made between tacit and intentional positioning. Tacit positioning generally refers to the discursive practice in which individuals position themselves, position others or are positioned (first order positioning). Intentional positioning occurs when positioning talk within the

¹⁵ Ibid, 4

¹⁶ Ibid, 18.

¹⁷ Ibid, 20-23.

ongoing storyline repositions a participant in the conversation (second order positioning).

Positioning theory posits four distinct types of intentional positioning—deliberate self-positioning, forced self-positioning, deliberate positioning of others, and forced positioning of others. Deliberate self-positioning is an expression of personal identity (the “I” in contrast to the “me”) and social identity (the type of person I am). An individual will strategically position him or herself by crafting a tailored narrative to achieve a certain objective by establishing rights or duties within the context of a specific discourse. This is particularly relevant when analyzing an individual’s autobiographical account of him or herself directed towards a specific audience.

Forced self-positioning essentially involves an individual accounting for who they are, usually by an institution that has some type of authority to make judgments about the individual, for example, the individual’s employer. Deliberate positioning occurs when one individual defines another within the speaker’s storyline. Forced positioning of others refers to the discursive practice in which an individual is directed to position a third party.¹⁸

The flexibility of positioning theory is demonstrated by its applicability to understanding the ongoing development of the ‘self’. Through the process of discursive interaction, individuals gain a sense of who they are and how to interpret the world by exposure to categories and their meanings. In addition, an individual experiences different positioning dependent on the discursive context as elaborated by various storylines. Within the context of radicalization and terrorist recruitment, a terrorist recruiter can be conceived as an individual that intentionally positions his target in a way that helps the target reconcile what “in the target’s mind” may be contradictory positions in favor of the recruiter’s goals. This moves the target towards the acceptance of the recruiter’s ideology and a step closer towards formal recruitment into the terrorist organization.

Central to the dynamic emergence of selfhood through discourse is the concept of ‘reflexive positioning’, in which an individual through self-narration positions him or herself through unfolding personal stories told through intrapersonal discourse. As we think, we interpret and generate storylines that help us make sense of and locate ourselves within our sociocultural environment. The notion of self-narration in which one

¹⁸ Ibid, 26-28

becomes positioned through intrapersonal discourse through the creation of storytelling provides a framework for understanding how our self-conception changes overtime. In addition, it appears to have an integrative function by taking disparate fragments of the self-combining them in a broader storyline that an individual experiences as a greater coherent unity over time. This may be reflected in an individual's overall feelings of confidence and self-esteem in a broader arena of social interaction. That said, individuals still remain a collection of personal narratives from a compendium of voices that inform and position the individual through intra- and interpersonal discourse.

Application of Positioning Theory to Radicalization Studies

Examining the discourse between a radicalizing influence (person, text, computer persona, etc.) and a potential target will provide insight on how the impact of the radicalizing discourse on its potential target within the course of a dialogic encounter. In this sense, positioning theory can contextualize the myriad of factors—storylines that influence the radicalization process (family ties, social networks, media/educational discourse, culturally constituted rules and obligations, religious doctrines/practices, etc.)—by providing a way to assess the individual's vulnerability to being funneled towards a narrowing array of life choices leading to extremist positions.

Positioning theory analysis would be particularly useful in understanding the radicalization of individuals already predisposed towards accepting radical doctrines by identifying potential pathways an individual may follow to address a particular need. Positioning theory, for example, would help elucidate what a terrorist recruiter views as a vulnerability in a potential recruit by identifying within the nature of the discourse the salient features the recruiter chose to focus on in positioning the target to become the hero of his own personal narrative blending duties and rights within a storyline. For example, Ahmad, a Palestinian teenager, is the sixth child of a family of eight children from a poor family living in Gaza. He aspires to be a writer, but educational opportunities are almost non-existent. The idea of the state of Israel and its supporter, the United States, have been positioned as evil entities by the media and educational institutions while growing up. A Hamas recruiter approaches Ahmad and pre-positions him as a potential hero to his family and his faith by offering him the opportunity to join, which would yield financial rewards to his family. It would also boost the status of Ahmad's family among its neighborhoods. A new set of duties are unveiled for him. He may come to believe he has a right to a fulfilling life.

In less clear circumstances, an individual may be undergoing the process of Islamist radicalization via the Internet, by media exposure and by virtue of the person's minority status in a non-Muslim country, which is experienced as a hostile environment. In this instance, a recruiter from an extremist organization may spend time carefully assessing while simultaneously positioning the potential recruit as having a duty to accept more radical positions by fashioning suitable storylines that could be incrementally adopted by the target. The aim of the recruiter is to move the individual to increasingly more extreme positions and perhaps eventual recruitment into the extremist organization.

Interdisciplinary Framework to Assess Radicalization Across Cultures

The proposed interdisciplinary framework offers an alternate way to conceptualize and analyze the radicalization process despite the diversity encountered in the various sociocultural environments where it is believed to occur. The proposed framework is designed to achieve the following objectives:

First, the framework is designed to assess individuals within their cultural environment. In contrast to a causal approach, the framework introduced in this article views the individual as inseparable from the particular sociocultural environment in which they are embedded. The notion of focusing on an individual's behavior within the context of lived experience means looking at the discursive acts that occur in the individual's daily life.

Second, the framework draws attention to the developmental process generally neglected in most studies on radicalization. The development of cognitive tools during youth that are subsequently available to manage experience are dependent in large part on the socializing influences of the various groups most proximate to children during their early years.

Third, the framework will assist in sorting out competing narratives that an individual may confront that are resident in the various social structures in which the individual is embedded. Through the analysis of discursive acts, the framework will provide a means of gaining insight into how an individual manages the narratives that help a person obtain an evolving sense of self across multiple social contexts.

A principle goal of the proposed framework is to offer a way to effectively minimize analyst bias by employing various disciplines to investigate the

radicalization process rather than have a specific discipline define the types of questions that can be asked about radicalization.

Components of the Framework

The framework focuses on four cultural traditions that are viewed by the author as more directly focused on the concept of youth as it relates to gaining insight into the radicalization process. The four cultural traditions that will focus and organize data collection and analysis are located in the following social structures: Family, school/educational traditions, peer group, local community.

Family

The first social group a child normally encounters in life is some cultural version of a family or caretaker(s) who will provide the child with the first sustained social interaction. It is within the context of parental belief systems that ways of discursive interaction are first learned by the child that help influence the development of the child's cognitive tools. Parental beliefs system vary greatly from culture to culture. In addition, as a child goes from childhood to adolescence a number of changes occur in the parent-child relationship that impact a child's sense of self as they seek to establish some type of an identity.

School/Educational Traditions

The various social structures either embodied in schools systems or educational traditions can have a profound impact on developing youth and the emergence of their cognitive abilities. Unfortunately, in attempting to use education as an element in establishing a profile of radicals and known terrorists, post hoc correlations have often operationalized education as educational level attained, rather than looking at the nature of the individual's educational experience. This type of analysis, using the simple measure of level of education attained, has produced ambiguous and contradictory results when trying to employ a single indicator to assess a child's educational experience.

Peer Group

An individual's peer group constitutes another critical domain of social experience within a specific cultural context that will subsequently influence the individual's life trajectory. The peer group domain takes on particular importance as a young child moves into adolescence and begins to spend more time with friends and non-adult family members. How these peer

group relationships manifest themselves in various cultural settings will differ; however, the nature and influence of these relationships will be qualitatively different than family relationships where parental authority imposes a different set of rights, duties and obligations between parent and child. In relationships with peers, developing youth do not depend on parents as intermediaries. Within peer relationships, youth begin to gain knowledge directly on matters of concern to them, for example, on how to assess risk, as well as engaging youthful perceptions on how to deal with those risks.

Cultural Community

In addition to the proximate influences of family, school, and peer group relationships, an individual is embedded in a cultural community. A cultural community in which an individual shares a range of characteristics that may include ethnicity, religion, and class, serves to situate the person within a broader society and more clearly define and establish a group identity. A cultural community contains versions of history and traditions established through community narratives that the individual may draw on to help the person locate him or herself within the local sociocultural matrix of relationships and construct a personal and social identity. It also offers another way for individuals to belong to their specific cultural environments. In this sense, understanding how an individual is embedded in a cultural community, whether that community is socially defined by religion, ethnicity, class, provides insight into the person's broader conception of available rights, duties, and obligations that may influence life choices.

Framework Analysis

The four components of the framework used to organize data collection will often overlap. Peer group relationships often take place in a school or educational setting. Family interactions will be influenced by community practices. School traditions are used to inculcate community codes of behavior, religious belief and notions of citizenship. The principal function of focusing attention on the four components is to obtain discourse from individuals embedded in key social structures that are viewed as most proximate to the individual. When discourse samples are identified, positioning analysis is employed to understand the individual within the person's cultural context, determine how well these social structures address the individual's developmental needs, and if warranted, potentially track the migration of the individual to a social structure that more directly satisfies that person's needs. In sum, the combination of understanding the narratives resident in each social structure, combined with the analysis of discourse that occurs within each of these social structures, will provide insight into which

individuals may be gravitating towards a life trajectory that leads to a diminishing range of options and ultimately to a set of categorical beliefs that are irreconcilable with other belief systems and sanction violence as the only legitimate means to impose their worldview.

Conclusion

Recent claims of stagnation in terrorism and radicalization research have focused attention on the difficulties of developing an empirically-based understanding of contemporary terrorism and the behavioral pathways that lead to violent extremist behavior.¹⁹ Although the stagnation claim may be overstated and even disputed, there appears to be a consensus among scholars that a number of questions remain unanswered.²⁰ Unfortunately, the causally-based reductionist methodology that has dominated research in this area has not yielded the hoped for results. In the author's view, to reanimate research on the radicalization process at the individual level requires a paradigm shift in which we study individuals as embedded in their sociocultural environments rather than trying to minimize culture in the search for psychological universals. The approach offered in this article is a potential alternative to understand an individual's life trajectory towards extremist behavior. Employing a theoretically-grounded discursive approach that seeks to understand individuals within their sociocultural environment seems better suited to capture the changing nature of behavior within context.

One implication is that the study of the radicalization of at-risk youth through discourse analysis holds the potential for engaging the broader civic community. Social agencies, international government entities and non-governmental agencies (NGO) involved in child protection are naturally closer to at-risk youth, and have greater access to the narratives youths are exposed to and the discourse they use to navigate through life. Their support in helping researchers understand local sociocultural dynamics and their ability to facilitate access to at-risk youth populations would be invaluable. Most

¹⁹ Marc Sageman, "Low Return on Investment," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26:4 (2014).

²⁰ Max Taylor, "If I Were You, I Wouldn't Start From Here: Response to Marc Sageman's 'The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,'" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26:4 (2014); David H. Schanzer, "No Easy Day: Government Roadblocks and the unsolvable Problem of Political Violence: A Response to Marc Sageman's 'The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,'" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26:4 (2014); Alex P. Schmid, "Comments on Marc Sageman's Polemic 'The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,'" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26:4 (2014); Jessica Stein, "Response to Marc Sageman's 'The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,'" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26:4 (2014); Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism."

importantly, these organizations could potentially serve as “first responders” to identify and assist at-risk vulnerable youth while working in collaboration with researchers using the discourse-based methodological framework to guide their efforts. Otherwise, trying to understand the process of radicalization that leads to extremist behavior will remain primarily a security issue addressed by security services and scholars who view radicalization within a counterterrorism context. If radicalization and terrorism research continues to be understood within this narrow perspective, the odds are good that research in this area will remain mired in a state of unrealized hopes.