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# Root Cause Approach to Prisoner Radicalisation

Nathan Thompson<sup>†</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Prison radicalisation in Australia has become a key focal point for the subject literature on radicalisation. However, while attention has been directed at identifying and apprehending violent extremists, less consideration has been given to what could be done with these people when convicted. This paper applies the *root cause model* to prisoner radicalisation to investigate the environmental, social and individual influences that contribute to radicalisation in prisons. This examination took a holistic view of the prison radicalisation process that is based on causal factors rather than the traditional *phase model* approach. It is argued that this is an important step in gaining an understanding of the interplay of influences in the prison radicalisation process. It is posited that once such an understanding is gained, it is more likely that effective disruption of the radicalisation process can occur.

**Keywords:** Prison, radicalisation, root cause model, violent extremists

## INTRODUCTION

Prison have long been referred to as a *school for crime* (Palermo, 2011). Some now extend this analogy to radicalisation, violent extremism and in some cases, terrorist recruitment (Smelser and Mitchell, 2002: 28). Despite the global interest in radicalisation since the declaration of the war on terror, no single profile exists for prisoners who are most vulnerable to radicalisation. With an increasing number of offenders being incarcerated globally for terrorism-related offences, the risk of the proliferation of radical views throughout correctional institutions is, arguably, increasing with time.

This paper posits that *contemporary phase* models are limited in their application and therefore a *root cause* approach was preferred. The importance of this approach is that its focus is on causal factors rather than on the chronology of the process. When applied to prison radicalisation, circumstances that are unique to the correctional environment reveal risk factors at three levels:

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institutional, social, and individual. The result is a picture of the interplay of factors that make prisoner radicalisation likely to occur.

It is argued that by developing a causation focused response, correctional institutions could be in a better position to identify vulnerable prisoners as well as the environmental factors to concentrate interventions and disengagement programs.

It should be noted that the scope of this paper is restricted to correctional environments and therefore it does not consider the effect of cultural and lifestyle factors that developed prior to imprisonment, nor how pre-incarceration factors contribute to vulnerability at an individual level.

### CRIMINALS VERSUS RADICALS

Attention to the issue of prison radicalisation in Australia has become a topic of interest within the subject literature (Silke, 2014; Useem & Clayton, 2009). However, while attention has been directed at identifying and apprehending radicals and violent extremists (e.g. *Counter-Terrorism Legislation Amendment (Foreign Fighters) Act* (Cth), 2014; Mullins, 2011), less consideration has been given to what could be done with these offenders after they have been convicted.

The issue of prison radicalisation is divided into two categories: firstly, the management of those after being convicted of terrorism-related offences; and secondly, those who were indoctrinated during their incarceration (Silke, 2014). Furthermore, a common finding among existing studies of radicalisation in correctional institutions was that they had often been conducted in isolation, focusing on a single ideological motive. Nonetheless, if a holistic view is taken, we are likely to see that the nature of the ideology—whether religious, racial or religio-political—is not a determinant in the likelihood that radicalisation will occur, but the subject literature does reveal several commonly agreed and disputed areas.

First, it was accepted amongst authors that there was an important distinction between conventional criminals and those who were radicalised (Anti-Defamation League, 2002; Blazak, 2001; Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014; Mulcahy, Merrington, & Bell, 2013; O'Toole & Eyland, 2011; Silke, 2014). Mulcahy et al. (2013: 11) specified the distinction stating “terrorists are motivated by ideological, religious or political gain, whereas criminals are largely driven by material gain.” Dugas and Kruglanski (2014: 430) concurred

stating “the demands of protecting the public from terrorists are different from those related to the typical criminal offender. This difference lies not only in the degree of threat but also in the motivations that propel the actor.” This contrast was not limited to radical Islamists with similar findings for right-wing hate groups. Blazak (2001: 994) extended the significance of motive to Nazi skinheads by specifying that “unlike economically driven gangs, hate groups have ideological motivations for recruitment.”

Given this situation, it could be argued that radicalised prisoners are a specific category of offenders who differ from conventional criminals. However, scholar’s views could be divided when considering the influence that correctional facilities have on the likelihood of radicalisation occurring. The supportive argument is that prisons are incubators for radicals and recruiting grounds for extremists, while opponents may challenge the correlation between incarceration and the uptake of radical ideologies (Anti-Defamation League, 2002; Hamm, 2009; Jones, 2014; Merola & Vovak, 2012; Silke, 2014; Trujillo, Jordan, Gutierrez, & Gonzalez-Cabrera, 2009).

### **Supportive Arguments**

Adherents to the supportive view, such as Mulcahy et al. (2013), argue that the volatility of the prison environment rendered prisoners vulnerable to recruitment by extremists. Riley (2002: 457) concurred, stating that “prisons are home to violent, predatory individuals” where prisoner minority groups were often targeted and victimised (Jones, 2014). Hamm (2009) and Trujillo et al. (2009) take the argument further by saying that custodial environments contain conducive conditions for jihadist recruiters to seek and indoctrinate prisoners from these vulnerable groups. Exit-Deutschland (2014) supported this position by saying that right-wing extremist groups were known to have a strong influence over prisoners and continually spread extremist material throughout the prison system.

In response, Muslim prisoners in Britain were reportedly forming prison gangs to gain a degree of protection from the hostility directed at them by non-Muslim prisoners; some prisoners were found to be converting to Islam to seek protection through gang membership also (Jones, 2014). A similar situation was observed among right-wing hate groups, such as the Aryan Circle, that formed to protect white prisoners from victimisation in this volatile environment (Anti-Defamation League, 2002). Several such prison gangs in the United States were

found to harbour radicalised ideologies and represented a source of the extremist threat within the prison environment (Anti-Defamation League, 2002). It was further identified that Islamist prisoners used gang recruitment models to disseminate extremist beliefs and to recruit (Hamm, 2009).

As was found with Islamist gangs, right-wing hate groups were also observed to have favoured the gang recruitment model (Blazak, 2001). According to the Anti-Defamation League (2002: 5), “inmates entering the system are easily recruited into prison gangs, primarily because such gangs offer protection,” however, these gangs can also represent a social precursor for ideological radicalisation (Silke, 2014).

Regardless of the ideology, the net result for the prison system is that ordinary offenders have the potential to evolve into violent extremists who represented a risk when released (Awan, 2013; Silke, 2014; Trujillo et al., 2009). This was exacerbated by some current correctional practices which were found to be conducive to ongoing radicalisation and had the potential to result in a greater commitment to violent extremism (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014). Hamm (2009: 682) emphasised the seriousness of this risk, stating, “what happens inside correctional institutions is now a matter of national security.”

While prisons have long been referred to as schools for criminals, where prisoners are exposed to ‘criminal ideologies’ and new offending methodologies, O’Toole and Eyland (2011) stopped short of extending this ideological saturation to extremists. Hamm (2009, citing Cuthbertson, 2004) however, did make this connection when he stated that just as minor criminals were refining their methods of criminal offending, prison was also a virtual training ground for potential violent extremists, providing ideological reinforcement and equipping them with the motivation and skills to participate in extremist activity once released. Such findings are also consistent with outcomes published by the Anti-Defamation League (2002) which found that members of right-wing hate groups were expected to remain engaged with the group and continue to offer support post-release.

### **Discounting Arguments**

Arguments in the subject literature also offer a contrasting view that focuses on prisoner conversions to Islam. These arguments say that there is no correlation between religion and the adoption of radicalised ideologies (Hamm, 2009; Jones, 2014; Merola & Vovak, 2012; Mulcahy et al., 2013). Jones (2014: 76) argued

that “Islamist militancy is not a foregone conclusion in certain prison environments. For example, in prisons where the main religion is not Islam, or in situations where prison subcultures dominate the prison environment.” A similar argument was presented by Mulcahy et al. (2013) when they stated that the relationship between the various processes of radicalisation and religion, particularly extremist versions, could not be sufficiently proven. Hamm (2009: 669) supported this finding, concluding that “there is no relationship between prisoner conversions to Islam and terrorism” and further, that the evidence indicated quite the opposite, that conversion to Islam acted as a behavioural moderator and assisted in the rehabilitation process (Hamm, 2009; Merola & Vovak, 2012).

Moreover, the prevalence of indoctrination by extremists in US prisons was low despite the impression that radicalisation was prolific (Jones, 2014). Merola and Vovak (2012: 738) supported this view when they argued “only one or a very small number of individuals out of the entirety of those incarcerated will ever pose a risk of this type [violent extremism].” Similarly, Wilner and Dubouloz (2011: 420) concluded that “few individuals who radicalise—even among those who vocally support violence in the name of their adopted cause—end up participating in violent behaviour.”

Bartlett, Birdwell, and King (2010) defined this distinction by dividing their results into radicalisation that lead to terrorist activity and that which remained radical, but non-violent. Borum (2011: 53) concluded “prisons did not factor prominently into most radicalization processes” when reviewing a 2008 study by Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman, while Jones (2014: 78) stated that there was “no evidence of widespread radicalisation, nor any indication of organised recruitment efforts.” However, these accounts were considered to be an isolated perspective of radicalisation viewed through the lens of Islamic conversion. While mainstream Islam was viewed to offer a stabilising effect for prisoner converts (Hamm, 2009; Silke, 2014), no such conclusions could be drawn for religio-political or right-wing hate groups. In contrast, right-wing extremist ideology was found to be further reinforced by the cultural and religious diversity of the prison population (Anti-Defamation League, 2002).

## CAUSES VERSUS COURSES

### **Phase Model**

While quantitative data on prison radicalisation in Australia was in short supply, it was reasonable to draw the inference that radicalisation is occurring to some degree within prisons. It was identified that there was no single profile for prisoners who were most susceptible to radicalisation (Awan, 2013; Borum, 2011). Veldhuis and Staun (2009: 21) echoed this view, stating, “there is no single explanation for radicalisation. The causes of radicalisation are as diverse as they are abundant,” and furthermore, that the phase model was fundamentally flawed in their attempt to explain the radicalisation process.

One view is that the phase model suffered from selection bias in so much as they apply solely to successfully radicalised outcomes, which were in turn reverse engineered to determine a chronology of events that lead to that end-state. But, this approach neglects unsuccessful or aborted cases (Awan, 2013; Veldhuis & Staun, 2009). Secondly, this model had the potential to victimise minority groups based on the target population and, according to Bartlett et al. (2010: 7), has the potential to “breed resentment and alienation.” This was particularly evident in the pre-radicalisation phase of the model developed by Silber and Bhatt (2007) that was criticised for labelling all Muslims as being pre-radicalised and required those authors to further define their model in the following years. It was on this basis that the phase model approach was abandoned in favour of a root cause model. This concept focused on causal factors at the macro-level, meso-level, and micro-level, which were examined to determine both the individual and group dynamics that contributed to radicalisation.

### **Root Cause Model**

As its name suggests, Veldhuis and Staun’s root cause model concentrates on the causal factors of radicalisation, rather than the chronological ‘courses’ of the phase model. They theorised that “the root cause model provides a framework with which to analyse how causal variables at different levels relate to each other and how they shape the circumstances under which radicalisation is more—or less—likely to occur” (Veldhuis & Staun, 2009: 21).

The model divides these causal factors into macro-level and micro-level influences. The macro-level focused on the social structures and environmental influences and although these factors defined the circumstances that were conducive to radicalisation, they failed to explain why a minority will become radicalised while the majority would not. Therefore, further assessment of factors at the micro-level was necessary to identify individual susceptibility to radical indoctrination. Micro-level factors focused on the individual rather than the environment and sought to identify influences that contributed to a state of personal vulnerability. This framework was applied to the correctional context by introducing prison specific influences to determine the effect of incarceration on the likelihood of a radicalised outcome.

*Macro-Level Factors.* According to Veldhuis and Staun (2009: 24), macro-level factors related to systemic and environmental influences and were defined as being:

...related to social structures and include, among other factors, demographic changes, political, economic and cultural alterations, educational attainment and labour market participation. Such contextual factors are generally accepted as preconditions for crime and deviant behaviour.

In the context of prison sub-cultures, the primary factor of significance was the hostility of the prison environment that was found to create a culture that fostered ideological recruitment (Hamm, 2009; Riley, 2002; Silke, 2014; Trujillo et al., 2009). This was exacerbated by reports of targeted victimisation against prisoner minority groups (Jones, 2014) and widespread racism in some correctional institutions (Joly, 2007). Within Australian prisons, Aboriginal prisoners were observed to feature significantly in Islamic conversions and the number of Aboriginal conversions was increasing with time (Box, 2015; Harris & Phelps, 2016). This reportedly resulted in the creation of ethnic or religious based prison gangs to gain a degree of personal protection (Jones, 2014; O'Toole & Eyland, 2011). The result was that the prisoner population was fragmented into multiple sub-groups based primarily on race, culture and religion where a predisposition to violence was normalised.

Hamm (2009) identified the overcrowding in correctional facilities and as an additional factor. Facility overcrowding was an ongoing prison management issue that resulted in a decline in the general living standards of those who were



incarcerated and adversely impacted the general prison culture (Merola & Vovak, 2012; O'Toole & Eyland, 2011). Correlations were also drawn between limited access to education and employment, health care and reduced personal space and increased reports of violence and hostility (O'Toole & Eyland, 2011). Ultimately, it was argued that such a pro-violence culture would be likely to promote victimisation and enhance the need for prisoners to resort to gang membership for protection (Silke, 2014). While the interplay between overcrowding and prison culture is a topic in its own right, and beyond the scope of this paper, it was concluded that “prisons that provide the best environments for radicalising inmates are those that are overcrowded” (Silke, 2014: 55).

*Micro-Level Factors.* Veldhuis and Staun (2009) divided micro-level factors into two subcategories; being social factors, and individual factors. Social factors were defined as how the individual interacted with peers and influential others. Individual factors were concerned with the personal circumstances that influenced how the individual interpreted and responded to experiences. Social factors were seen to create the circumstances for ‘radicalisation by association’ through mechanisms such as *Social Movement Theory*, which Mulcahy et al. (2013) asserted was one of the most important theoretical frameworks for understanding group dynamics regarding radicalisation.

Based on findings by Della Porta (1995), Mulcahy et al. (2013: 8) postulated that “militant radicals were bound together by personal ties and by their shared activist experiences and participating radicals acted as a self-reinforcing mechanism to drive radical activists to become increasingly more radical.” A view echoed by Aly and Striegheer (2012) and Sageman (2008) when they each reported that ongoing and intensive interaction with radicalised peers had the potential to further radicalise impressionable associates. Media reports of an Islamic State (IS) inspired prison gang in Goulburn Prison add further weight to this argument, where it was reported that the segregation of radical Islamists had resulted in the continuation and intensification of their radical beliefs (Phelps, 2015; Rubinsztein-Dunlop & Dredge, 2016).

As the influence of social interaction was a key contributor to the transformative process, peer interactions between prisoners could not be ignored (Veldhuis & Staun, 2009). Ryan (2007: 1,006) identified four specific areas of exploitation by radical recruiters. These were defined as *Persecution*, *Precedent*, *Piety* and *Perseverance* (referred to as the *Four Ps*) and he applied this concept to both religious and non-religious cases, summarising that “irrespective of one’s

cultural background, the formula of heroes, grievance, and goal can be easily understood.”

Reference to some form of persecution or grievance was abundant throughout the literature, and more so in relation to prisoners (Blazak, 2001; Joly, 2007; Jones, 2014; Riley, 2002; Ryan, 2007; Trujillo et al., 2009; Veldhuis & Staun, 2009; Wilner & Dubouloz, 2011). Jones (2014) identified that some young offenders entering British prisons were interacting with terrorist prisoners and converting to Islam as an act of defiance towards the justice system, driven by a self-imposed sense of victimhood. Right-wing recruitment demonstrated a similar trend where injustice, powerlessness and perceived discrimination were reportedly responsible for an increased acceptance of an extremist narrative (Exit-Deutschland, 2014). Similar findings were also reported for militant Irish republicans who exploited their perceived persecution to enhance the effectiveness of their recruitment narrative (Ryan, 2007).

The compound result of such a collective grievance was a destabilised environment that was conducive to extremist recruitment, and more so, if the prisoner ‘blamed’ society for their incarceration (Anti-Defamation League, 2002; Trujillo et al., 2009). When framed as an ongoing struggle against unjust oppressors, this perceived conflict between the West and Islam (Wilner & Dubouloz, 2011), or the risk that multiculturalism was perceived to represent to the purity of the white race (Blazak, 2001), the injustice was personalised and therefore attracted an unwarranted level of credibility. According to Ryan (2007: 999) “republicans, like Islamists, harvested past heroes and historical injustices to feed their contemporary campaign” and when coupled with the pious image that the radical is conducting God’s work, the attributed credibility is further reinforced in the minds of the impressionable (Blazak, 2001; Ryan, 2007). In the correctional environment, this was achieved through personal interaction between influential ideological recruiters including radical Imams, and vulnerable prisoners (Hamm, 2009; Veldhuis & Staun, 2009). Ryan (2007: 986) appropriately summarised this recruitment strategy, stating that, “when viewed through the prism of Islamic military history, the *Four Ps* are an intoxicating mix to sympathisers,” and its application can also be extended to various other ideologies.

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

Building on the works of Mulcahy et al. (2013) and Wilner and Dubouloz (2011), the influence of *Transformative Learning Theory* in prisoner radicalisation was examined to gain an understanding of the development of susceptibility at the individual level. Transformative learning sought to explain the process of learnt adaption in response to an involuntary change of environment (Mezirow, 1991). Adapted by Mulcahy et al. (2013), it was used to determine the degree of vulnerability to radicalisation that newly incarcerated prisoners experienced because of their imprisonment. Mezirow (1991) argued that transformative learning commenced with meaning schemes and perspectives that formed the basis of our expectations and belief systems, and were fundamental to our problem-solving capability. That is, when an individual encounters a new experience, they rely on past experiences, knowledge, assumptions and biases to interpret that event.

A sociolinguistic distortion, or trigger event, occurs when the individual is unable to make sense of an occurrence based on past experiences, which prompts a process of critical reflection. Mezirow (1991: 6) argued that “reflective learning becomes transformative whenever assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid.” This confusion compels the individual to seek new meaning schemes or perspectives and results in the individual undergoing a process of psychological or cognitive transformation to adapt to their new environment.

When applying this framework to prison radicalisation, specific contextual influences emerged. The experience of incarceration, particularly for the first time, was considered to represent a distortion which had the potential to trigger transformative learning. Sykes (1958: 79) referred to this as the “pains of imprisonment” that were defined as “frustrations or deprivations which attend the withdrawal of freedom, such as the lack of heterosexual relationships, isolation from the free community, the withholding of goods and services, and so on.”

Arguably, this deprivation extends to one’s inability to continue the criminal lifestyle that many prisoners are accustomed to. The change in personal circumstances, which were outside the individual’s control, was viewed as a “serious psychological assault upon the self” (Riley, 2002: 444), including the

loss of liberty, identity, and personal security (Dhami, Ayton, & Loewenstein, 2007; Joly, 2007). According to Wilner and Dubouloz (2011: 423), it is at this point that the “individual comes to realise that the old reality simply no longer exists and a new one must be established. This realisation facilitates the process of identifying with the newly internalised reality and encourages an exploration of new roles.” Mulcahy et al. (2013) referred to this experience as a state of emotional trauma that left new prisoners in a condition of vulnerability and which was often exploited by extremist recruiters (Anti-Defamation League, 2002).

The outcome was a process of self-reflection whereby the prisoner begins to question their identity and preconceptions (Mezirow, 1991; Wilner & Dubouloz, 2011). Joly (2007) postulated that this reflective process results in the prisoner regaining a social identity and developing a new personal identity that was relative to their new environment and circumstances. In many cases, this provided the motivation for prisoners to seek religion (Hamm, 2009) with a noteworthy majority (reported to be approximately eighty percent in the United States) of prisoners in western jurisdictions favouring Islam (Jones, 2014; McGilloway, Ghosh, & Bhui, 2015; Mulcahy et al., 2013).

While mainstream Islam was observed to represent a behavioural stabiliser (Hamm, 2009; Silke, 2014), more extreme versions of prison Islam (referred informally as *Prislam*) were found to have the opposite effect (Silke, 2014). Concerningly, of the many prisoner converts who sought guidance from Islam, the majority demonstrated only a superficial knowledge, if any at all, of the religion, rendering them vulnerable to the influence of radical peers and extremist doctrines (Awan, 2013; McGilloway et al., 2015). Equally, some prisoners with underlying racist sentiments were known to identify with right-wing ideology that validated their existing bigotry and prejudices (Anti-Defamation League, 2002).

Gang membership was another common occurrence during critical reflection, particularly when redefining one’s personal identity. Silke (2014, p. 52) argued that “when individuals become incarcerated, the quickest way to establish their identity is through affiliation with a gang,” which represented an important intersection between individual and social influences.

Wilner and Dubouloz (2011) explained that radicalisation occurred during this reflective process where new knowledge is sought and personal identity is

reassessed. The final stage of Mezirow's theory focused on the process of transformation. According to Wilner and Dubouloz (2011: 433), the transformative process "is marked by an individual reflecting on the psychological, social and spiritual issues they encounter when dealing with a disorienting dilemma and with the restructuring of meaning perspectives as they learn to adapt to new realities."

In the context of prison radicalisation, the transformative process resulted in a common set of traits including social isolation resulting from a lack of engagement with pre-existing social networks such as friends and family on the outside (Joly, 2007; McGilloway et al., 2015; Silke, 2014; Veldhuis & Staun, 2009), favouring a peer group of like-minded prisoners (Jones, 2014; Mulcahy et al., 2013; Sykes, 1958; Wilner & Dubouloz, 2011) and legitimising the use of violence in response to perceived wrongs against the in-group that they identify with (Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014; Hamm, 2009; Liebling & Arnold, 2012; Trujillo et al., 2009). These conditions constituted a potentially conducive environment for the newly radicalised prisoner to remain distanced from elements of their previous identity such as social networks and continue to be ideologically saturated with extremist narratives and propaganda, thus strengthening their newly radicalised identity which normalised the use of violence.

## CONCLUSION

Experience shows that while most prisoners are unlikely to succumb to extremist doctrines, a minority will. This paper explored the factors that explain why some will radicalise, while others will not. It offers insight into the interplay between environmental, social, and individual factors that when operating collectively, produce conditions that are conducive to radicalisation. It presents a cogent argument for an alternative approach to the use of a phase model for dealing with prison radicalisation. That is, correctional administrators should be aware that the psychological strain on newly incarcerated prisoners can represent a transformative trigger—prison subcultures fuelled by volatility and uncertainty can present a pathway to radicalisation. The interpersonal relationships formed in prison, particularly with radicals, adds further to this transformation.

It could be concluded that radicalisation is best achieved in overcrowded facilities where prison gangs can exert influence and offer protection to vulnerable prisoners. Those who are re-establishing an identity relative to their

incarceration are likely to be most susceptible to these environmental and social influences, and thus, will demonstrate a heightened response to these precursors. It follows that early identification is an important aspect in any intervention because it offers the opportunity to divert a vulnerable prisoner. This could help avoid the production of a violent and ideologically driven person who is equipped with the desire, skills, and hatred necessary to commit acts of serious harm.

#### DISCLAIMER

No representation is made on behalf of any correctional institution. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author.

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