Moral support for violent extremism, low self-control and political violence. Testing Core Assumptions of Situational Action Theory

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Vil ha sharia-lover i Norge!

Hadde han selv blitt dømt for forbrytelsene sine i henhold til sharia-lov, hadde han blitt steinet i hjel...
Structure of this presentation

• (1) Outline of theoretical framework: is SAT applicable to the study of violent extremism?
• (2) Previous studies of violent extremism guided by SAT
• (3) The conditional effects of controls hypothesis
• (4) Discussion and conclusion
Introduction

• Many studies of violent extremism are limited, often relying on anecdotes and a small number of case studies.
• Schmid & Jongman (1988) on studies on terrorism:
  • “Impressionistic, superficial, often pretentious, venting far reaching generalizations on the basis of “episodic evidence…”
• Horgan (2005) and Bouhanna & Wikström (2008) came to same conclusion.
• Publications increased by 300% since 9-11...
• BUT: less than 5% of studies on Islamic extremism is empirical (Christmann, 2012).
• Separate worlds: there is a huge body of literature on political violence and illegal political protest, but these studies are often ignored in contemporary studies (for an overview: Opp, 2009)
• Scholars seem to treat every phenomenon as something different...
Theoretical background

• Action (Violent extremism) = f (individual) * (situation)

• Meta-theoretical framework:
  • Complex structural individualism (Manzo, 2007; Opp, 2009)
  • Theoretical framework: Situational Action Theory (Wikström, 2004; Wikström et al., 2012)

• In SAT, extremist propensity is determined by
  • (a) personal morals that are supportive of violent extremism (e.g. supportive of the use of violence by terrorist groups)
  • (b) the capacity to exercise self-control.
Theoretical background

Source: Wikström, 2005
Some key testable propositions of SAT that can be applied to the study of violent extremism

• **(1) The Principle of Moral Correspondence**
  • “The higher the correspondence between a persons moral rules and the moral rules of the setting in which he or she takes part, the more likely it is the he or she will act in accordance with the moral rules of the setting.”

• **(2) The Principle of the Conditional Relevance of Controls**
  • “A persons ability to exercise self-control (internal controls) and deterrence (external controls) is only causally relevant when there is a discrepancy between a persons moral rules and the moral rules of the setting in which they take part) as regards carrying out a particular action.”

• **(3) There are causes and causes of the causes of violent extremism.**
• **Details: see Wikström et al. (2012)**
Why apply SAT to political violence?

• (1) Political violence and terrorism studies = poorly developed theories (Horgan, 2005; Bouhanna & Wikström, 2008; Opp, 2009)
• (2) General Action Theory. General Theories have some advantages above MRT’s (See K.D. Opp, 2013 for a discussion on GT versus MRT)
• (3) Successful applications in the domain of adolescent offending (Pauwels & Svensson, 2014). However, it is important to move beyond adolescent offending!
• (4) SAT succeeds in bridging levels, in integrating situational and personal explanations
Previous partial tests of propositions of SAT applied to political violence

- (1) PEA-HYPOTHESIS (Schils & Pauwels, 2014, Pauwels & et al., 2014)
- (2) DEA-models
- Causes of the causes of political violence ("Life-Course Differential Susceptibility to Extremist Beliefs")
- (a) why are some individuals exposed to extremist settings (self-selection and social selection)
- (b) why do some people develop a propensity towards violent extremism
Generalized model of violent extremism

Causes of the causes
- Social bonds
- Trust and perceived legitimacy
- Perceived discrimination

Intermediate processes
- Moral beliefs and low self-control (propensity)
- Exposure to extremist settings

P * E interactions
- Violent extremism
Data

• RADIMED-Project (funded by Belgian Science Policy & Ministry of the Interior- See Pauwels et al, 2014)

• Paper and pencil survey
  – High school students Antwerp and Liège (N = 600), 16-18 years (highest grades of secondary education in the Belgian educational system)

• Online survey
  – Belgian youth between 16 and 24 years old
  – Especially university and university college students (web survey)
  – N = 6020 respondents, N= 4000 after careful data cleaning
The Causes of the Causes Model

Cumulative overall risk factors per domain (loglinear path model Mplus 7.2) RMSEA : 0.02
Causes of the causes model - detailed version
The effects of the environment go through the individual

Causes:
Perc. Discrim, Social Bonds, Lack of respect, Relig. author., Anomia, Low proc just, Low Legitim, Low self-control, Moral support, Active Exposure, Political violence

Effects of the environment:
The effects of the environment go through the individual.
The present study: and how about the he conditional relevance of self-control hypothesis?

- **RQ1**: Is there empirical evidence for moderator effects of the ability to exercise self-control?
- **RQ2**: And if so, are these moderator effects stable across types of violence, moral beliefs and dimensions of low self-control?
- **RQ2a**: Is there similarity across types of violent extremism (political vandalism versus violence)
- **RQ2b**: Similarity across moral orientations (e.g. moral support for right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, religious extremism)?
- **RQ2c**: Similarity across dimensions of the capability to exercise self-control (thrill-seeking / impulsiveness)
Propositions derived from the “conditional effect of controls” hypothesis

• Proposition 1: The effect of a low capability to exercise self-control increases as moral support for right-wing extremism increases.

• Proposition 2: The effect of a low capability to exercise self-control increases as moral support for left-wing extremism increases.

• Proposition 3: The effect of a low capability to exercise self-control increases as moral support for religious extremism increases.
The case of moral support for the use of violence by left-wing extremist groups
The case of moral support for the use of violence by right-wing extremist groups
The case of moral support for the use of violence by religious extremist groups
RQ2: How stable is the conditional relevance of low self-control?

• Similarity across types of violent extremism? (political vandalism versus political violence)
  ✔ YES-surprisingly stable (figures on demand)

• Similarity across dimensions of the capability to exercise self-control (thrill-seeking / impulsiveness)
  ✔ YES-surprisingly stable (figures on demand)
Conclusions

• Political violence: like any other type of rule-breaking, it’s all about interactions, as predicted by SAT
• Person * environment interactions (extremist-propensity is triggered by situational cues – virtual and in the real world)
• Situationally resistance versus susceptibility
• Interactions between moral beliefs and self-control
Key issues regarding the causes of the causes of violent extremism

• (1) **Additional moderators?** Does extremist propensity moderates the effects of the causes of the causes? Higher order interaction effect: e.g. key person-environment interactions are further moderated by social bonds

• (2) Why people vary in their **moral support for violent extremism and how do ecological patterns of moral support emerge?**

• (3) why **environments** differ in their **extremist-prone features** (i.e. in the adherence to extremist norms and their lack of enforcement), why are some environments vulnerable to the presence of **recruiters**?

• (4) why certain kinds of people are exposed to certain kinds of settings (**social selection** and **self-selection**).

• (5) **joining** versus **leaving** extremist groups: desistance versus disengagement (**panel studies needed in multiple settings**)
From theory to practice...

- Implementing key findings from research
- Finding the balance! Situational and structural prevention
- Best prevention = avoid that people adhere to extremist norms, but prevention measures should be combined for optimal effect
- The extremist makes the opportunity (perceives action alternatives, vulnerable / suitable targets)
- Tackle both supply and demand! Radicalizing individuals and recruiting agents select overlapping activity-fields
Questions?
Methodological appendix
Measures of moral support for extremism

• **Support for religious extremism** (5-point scale):
  ‘I sympathize with the idea that some religious fundamentalists use violence against the people who have the power in Belgium’, ‘religious fundamentalists disrupt the order’, ‘use violence against other people’.

• **Support for left-wing extremism** (5-point scale): ‘I sympathize with the idea that anti-globalists use violence against the people who have the power in Belgium’, ‘anti-globalists disrupt the order’, ‘antiglobalists use violence against other people’.

• **Support for right-wing extremism** (5-point scale): ‘I sympathize with the idea that right-wing extremists use violence against the people who have the power in Belgium’, ‘right-wing extremists disrupt the order’, ‘right-wing extremists use violence against other people’.
Measuring low self-control

• **Impulsiveness** (5-point scale): ‘I always say what I think, even if it is not nice or smart’, ‘If I want something, I do it immediately’, ‘I lose my temper easily’, ‘When I am really angry, other people better stay away from me’.

• **Thrill-seeking behaviour** (5-point scale): ‘I sometimes find it exciting to do things that may be dangerous’, ‘I often do things without thinking of the consequences’, ‘Sometimes I will take a risk just for the fun of it’.
Measuring self-reported political violence

• **Self-reported political violence towards persons** (4-point scale): Have you ever: ‘... fought with someone in relation to your political or religious belief’, ‘... threatened someone on the internet who had different political or religious beliefs’, ‘... threatened someone on the streets who had different political or religious beliefs’, ‘... hit a foreigner’, ‘... hit a capitalist’.
Measuring self-reported political violence

- **Self-reported political violence towards property** (4-point scale): have you ever (*in relation to your political or religious beliefs*): ‘... written on a wall a political message or politically oriented graffiti’, ‘... participated in a political action that was not allowed’, ‘... thrown stones at the police during a demonstration?’, ‘... destroyed something on the streets?’, ‘... damaged someone’s property?’, ‘...set something on fire?’. 
Further readings

• **Book:**

• **Articles:**