RAN Centre of Excellence

RAN ISSUE PAPER

Protective and promotive factors building resilience against violent radicalisation

Introduction

This paper is intended for decision makers in the fields of (social) policy and practice. It provides a solid basis for those charged with tackling the risk factors that can create a breeding ground for radicalisation.

There is an extensive body of literature on both risk and protective factors of generic violence in adolescence (which is often described as 'anti-social problem behaviour'), but most theoretical and empirical studies on the specific problem of radicalisation and violent extremism tend to focus solely on the risk factors. Risk factors are generally considered to be factors that predict unhealthy or undesirable development. Magnus Ranstorp's brief overview of research on push and pull factors evokes a 'kaleidoscope of risk factors, creating infinite individual combinations' that might encourage violent extremism (i).

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This Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) paper provides an overview of nine thematic risk factors: (1) individual social-psychological factors, e.g. anger and a sense of injustice; (2) social factors, e.g. marginalisation and discrimination; (3) political factors, e.g. narratives of 'us versus them'; (4) ideological factors, e.g. Salafi-jihadi interpretations of Islam, and dissatisfaction with foreign policies; (5) culture and identity crises reinforced by occupying the indistinct space between cultures; (6) psychological trauma, e.g. post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); (7) group dynamics, e.g. friends who are active in violent extremist networks; (8) recruitment strategies, e.g. groomers; and (9) social media.

Although risk factors can indicate which risks need to be mitigated, countered or eliminated, they cannot offer guidelines for protective policies or for positive action. This is why the risk approach is sometimes criticised, particularly by social professionals seeking to draw up a social strategic agenda against extremism (ii).

This paper identifies and explores how an understanding of protective factors can be of use when addressing risk, and can thereby contribute to the development of individual and societal resilience against extremism.

To this end, the paper:

(1) specifies which risk factors can be mitigated by which protective factors;
(2) explains the importance of promotive factors in mitigating risk;
(3) explains the importance of promotive factors in enhancing well-being and strengthening individual and societal resilience;
(4) presents a kaleidoscopic overview, including implications for policies and practices.

(1) Identifying protective factors

Which protective factors can be linked when attempting to address risk factors, according to Ranstorp? Protective factors are not always merely positive opposites of risk factors — they act as buffers or mechanisms against undesirable behaviour. For example, 'anger' (which is one of the individual, socio-psychological root cause factors) is an element of almost all adolescent transitions: countering this factor (i.e. problematising, medicalising or criminalising it) will often prove counter-productive.

Yet risk factors do help us identify protective factors. For example, a report on Daesh's paper trail ([iii]) identifies a remarkable risk factor, namely the gap between educational achievement and subsequent professional position. This phenomenon is considered to generate high levels of frustration over one's societal status. Expectation management and a fairer job market might make a difference in this respect, and could therefore constitute protective factors.

Moreover, positive family and/or social networks can mediate and help negotiate several risk factors at individual, social, political, ideological and cultural levels, e.g. grievances, alienation and social exclusion or marginalisation ([iv]). Finally, policies that respect the sovereignty of foreign nations are likely to contribute to geopolitical stability and modulate extremism in the long term.

(2) Protective and promotive factors

Linking risk factors to protective factors allows for a positive, action-based approach that highlights social policies and practices of individual care and counselling. This is the foundation for a genuine preventive outlook in which all kind of risks of radicalisation are mitigated.

Is this preventive approach predominantly deficit based or strength based? Does it, for example, take young people's capabilities and desire for individual significance (v) and collective agency into account? Does it go beyond the identification of problems in deviant family settings or targeted communities? The focus appears to be on the individual child/youth or family in need of safeguarding, rather than on creating opportunities for agency and empowerment. In the case of young children, this view is legitimate, as their protection is key. In the case of adolescents, this view is harder to defend, as their education is also vital, e.g. offering them guidance and gradually granting them increasing responsibilities. In youth studies literature, this difference is reflected in the model from Benson et al. (2004) (vi) shown in Figure 1.

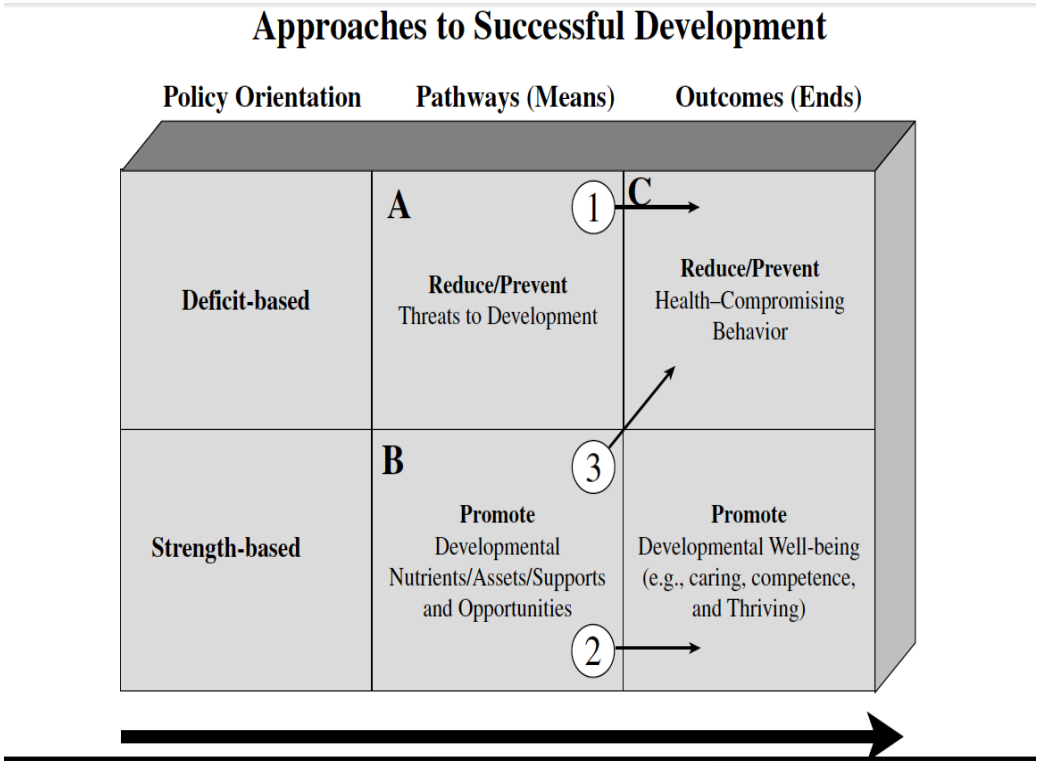

Figure 1. Benson et al. (2004)

Deficit-based interventions (Arrow 1) aim to reduce certain risk factors by offering protection against behaviour that might compromise individual well-being. An illustrative example is car safety belts which are used to prevent injury. In the context of violent extremism, the image of a shield serves to illustrate: for example, banning propaganda safeguards individuals from recruitment for malevolent purposes. Strength-based interventions (Arrows 2 and 3) aim to promote attitudes and behaviours that empower individuals in their environment, just as driving lessons are used to promote careful driving. In the

context of violent extremism, this would include media literacy education and the cultivation of agency and expression; it would mean learning to say 'yes' to certain constructive ideas and practices that increase agency and significance within the democratic framework. The model demonstrates the importance of a strength-based approach that enhances both protective and promotive factors.

Promotive factors have been defined as assets or resources (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005vii) like efficacy, identity, and future orientation. Resources are factors that are external to the individual, such as adult mentors and opportunity structures. Promotive assets and resources can be integrated through involvement in prosocial activities, because participation requires both individual initiative and external opportunity structures.

(3) Strengthening resilience through a strength-based protective and promotive policy

Research shows that enhancing positive factors is easier than mitigating negative conditions (viii). The strength-based approach highlights the importance of developing individual and societal resilience against radicalisation and violent extremism. Resilience theory provides a framework for comprehending how some youngsters overcome risk exposure, and guides the development of interventions for prevention using a strength-based approach (ix).

Resilience may be defined as 'the ability to "bounce back" from adversity' (x). The case for strengthening resilience is supported by the demand and supply model (xi), the public health model (xii) and research carried out in the 'Strengthening resilience against violent radicalisation' (STRESAVIORA) project. The latter highlights the importance of several elements: a positive emotional and educational climate emphasising autonomy, open-mindedness, the value of success, and stable religious values; personal resources for coping with problems effectively; individual social support; and last but not least, strategies for coping with adversity (xiii).

The STRESAVIORA project notwithstanding, few empirical studies have been carried out on strengthening resilience in order to counter violent radicalisation. A notable exception is the work on Somali-American citizens by Weine (2012). This study distinguishes various target audiences for CVE policy: vulnerable individuals, vulnerable (sub) groups and (diaspora) communities. Weine also summarises key points on resilience and CVE: 1) one may be resilient to some risks but not necessarily to others; 2) resilience is formed at both an individual and a social level; 3) families are the strongest buffer against risk factors for violent extremism; and 4) in diaspora communities, resilience is shaped by a combination of home country experiences and the mainstream values of the country of residence (xiv). Resilience is no monolith: it needs to be cultivated at different levels of interaction, and an awareness of situational contexts, and (family) histories is key.

Moreover, an individualistic society will emphasise individual resilience. It seems, though, that tackling radicalisation also requires societal resilience. Bouncing back is a collective endeavour, as demonstrated

by the reactions to terror in cities around the world. Collectivism is vital for achieving a sound recovery from violent attacks. Daesh is now considered the biggest and most dynamic counter-cultural movement of our era (xv) and extremism recruitment strategies have become very sophisticated strategically, both offline and online (e.g. social media). Rather than seeking to formulate a counter-narrative against extremist propaganda (which carries the risk of emphasising the extremist message), establishing a counter-environment eliminates the fertile ground for violent resistance by building a positive identity-oriented dynamic in multi-layered socialisation settings (xvi). Protective and promotive factors strengthen individual and societal resilience.

(5) An extended kaleidoscopic overview

In his model, Ranstorp (2016) provided a kaleidoscopic overview of risk factors. The findings on protective and promotive factors can now be combined with Ranstorp's factors, as shown in Figure 2.

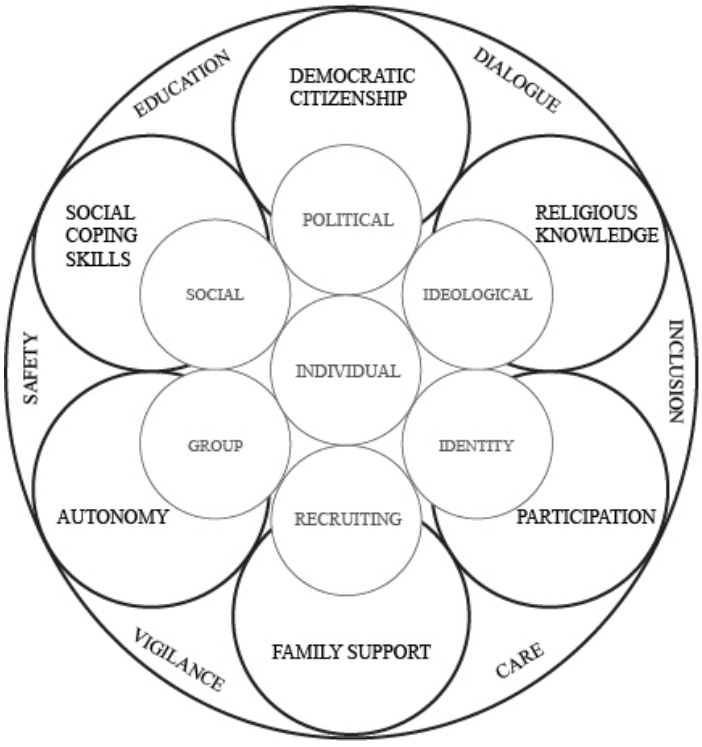

Figure 2. A kaleidoscope of risk, protective and promotive factors.

The factors in Figure 2 reflect Julia Kristeva's words (2013)xvii on extremism: 'the challenge posed by adolescence is a problem for international politics and individual psyches alike.' The core of the figure (in grey) is formed by the individual. Personal risk factors are victimhood, anger, and feelings of humiliation. The individual is surrounded by the remaining risk factors, as described by Ranstorp (2016): social factors (exclusion, social immobility, crime), political factors (foreign policy, islamophobia, war), ideological/religious factors (historical missions, ummah), cultural/identity factors (lack of belonging,

identity crisis, marginalisation), recruiting factors (pull of the extremist milieu, social media, targeting of the vulnerable), group dynamics (friendship and kinship, groupthink, social media).

In the intermediate layer of factors, the main protective factors are represented. These factors maintain a distance between the individual and deviancy or harm. Each one mitigates risk and promotes individual resilience in relation to a particular risk factor, as described below (clockwise in Figure 2).

- To protect against political alienation, focus on democratic citizenship. The mechanisms of radicalisation (e.g. propaganda, recruitment) are relevant here. Schools require a polarisation policy and should be stimulated to think beyond cognitive citizenship education, by enabling students to actively engage with and express themselves in a democratic experience by developing peaceful fighting skills and conflict resolution skills.
- To protect against apocalyptic ideology, offer religious knowledge. Provide religious counter-narratives and internet safeguarding measures.
- To protect against identity crises, stimulate personal participation. The ability of an individual to negotiate multiple identities works as a protective factor against cultural and identity crises ([xviii]), as do coping mechanisms like meditation or trauma therapy which help individuals manage general life adversities ([xix]).
- To protect against the pull of the extremist milieu, provide a warm and/or supported family environment. Various family members can be supported with strategies (like awareness-raising or family therapy) which are appropriate for different life stages ([xx]). The authoritative parenting style (proving warmth and also observing rules) is considered the most protective ([xxi]).
- To help individuals resist negative influences from friendship and kinship, cultivate autonomy and self-esteem. A strong sense of self-esteem and self-control (agency) ([xxii]) renders individuals less susceptible to group dynamics, groomers and extremist religious interpretations ([xxiii]). Character education will enhance students' grades, social-emotional well-being, and life skills ([xxiv]).
- To protect from (feelings of) exclusion, enhance social coping skills. Dissatisfaction stemming from identity politics must be taken seriously, and be neither criminalised nor neglected ([xxv]). Health and social care professionals should address the problem of social pain in a polarising society, and work proactively around the social needs, talents and ideals of their clients.

Finally, the various dynamic combinations of factors are held together by a third and ultimate layer representing the key promotive factors predicting societal resilience. Strong institutions and policies offering opportunities to engage in practices are characterised by the following features (clockwise in Figure 2).

- Dialogue: the exchange of views through non-violent conflict on various societal levels. This is a means of expanding individual viewpoints by learning from one another's ideas.

- Inclusion: fostered by promoting unity in diversity over (essentialist) identity politics. Extremist recruitment excels in exacerbating societal strife over identities and societal diversity. Messages of celebrating unity in diversity have become more important.
- Care: human compassion and evidence-based methods combined (xxvi). This calls for better management of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) via tailored youth care, and prioritising individuals' mental health and/or spiritual needs over the system's default 'solutions' (often based on medical diagnoses abstracted from their social or religious contexts).
- Vigilance: being watchful over our youth and its influencers, and investing in cooperation between police and citizens, within a democratically controlled surveillance system.
- Social safety: providing citizens with institutionalised protection. This also involves mentoring youth and supporting their families, using their own definition of the problems as a starting point. The strategic challenge here is to transform the failings and work gradually towards empowerment. Helping individuals to learn to take responsibility for their actions ultimately offers the best protection.
- Education: The didactic and pedagogical challenge lies in engaging with students in a way that relates to their experiences, perceptions and world views. Schools with a record of excellence in prevention have their staff attend training sessions and gain experience in on-the-job learning practice, have long-lasting ties with other institutions in professional networks, are often pioneers in educating on democracy and media literacy, and furthermore, are prepared to deal with other new problems as they arisexxvii.

In short, a comprehensive P/CVE programme should aim to weaken and reduce risk factors and enhance protective and promotive factors, by strengthening resilience in the areas mentioned above. Policymakers should consider encouraging and facilitating social practitioners to opt for a strength-based approach over a deficit-based approach. However, in the current politicised climate, this may not always be possible. This is where the idea of resilience can prove useful: it provides an overarching strength-based framework to stimulate protective factors on different aggregation levels, covering the individual, the community and society. Creating resilience is an interactive and reciprocal process that is realised on different levels.

The images in a kaleidoscope are not static; they shift and alter constantly. Likewise, the factors in Figure 2 are not static. Its parts combine and dissolve, resulting in different combinations and perspectives, as seen in individual cases. In light of the resilience agenda, this analogy can be extended: the kaleidoscope may be viewed as taking the form of a bouncing ball. The outer layer of promotive factors helps keep the protective factors in place, in order to effectively encapsulate the risk factors. When confronting severe problems and difficulties, protective factors will give way to risk factors. An integral policy aimed at creating resilience will react by enhancing protective and promotive mechanisms that can help not only in overcoming the given challenge, but also in learning from it, so as to better cope with similar issues in the longer term.

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