

The Radical Milieu: A Methodological Approach to Conducting Research on Violent Extremism

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ABSTRACT¹

One of the biggest challenges to conducting research on radicalization to violent extremism is how to further knowledge in the absence of easy access to radical individuals. This lack of access makes it particularly difficult to fulfill the demand for original data on radicalization to violent extremism and on strategies to counter it.

This chapter presents the Royal United Services Institute's (RUSI) effort to overcome this challenge. RUSI's *milieu approach* takes into consideration the importance of the context in which specific cases of radicalization take place. This is based on an understanding that research participants within these areas are able to relay contextual information about potential grievances or broader incentives impacting radicalization. The chapter highlights that these participants are frequently able to share actual knowledge of radicalization based on their lived experiences and knowledge of events affecting friends, colleagues, and family members. This approach additionally recognizes the expertise of local communities and positions authorities to learn from them.

The chapter presents the theoretical basis and the practical implications (site selection, identifying and accessing participants; selecting research methods; and analyzing data) of applying the milieu approach using case study examples of research conducted by RUSI. These include a five-country study (UK, Canada, France, Germany and the Netherlands) on gender and radicalization, research on radicalization among internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities in Iraq, and the radicalization of Central Asian labor migrants in Russia. The chapter highlights the challenges faced, ways of overcoming them, and key takeaways and recommendations for those interested in applying the milieu approach.

INTRODUCTION

Studying violent extremism is fraught with conceptual and technical issues. Conceptually the work is contentious—illustrated, in part, by the absence of consensus on definitions of key terms, including terrorism and violent extremism.² The low volume of incidents and the relatively small number of individuals in any one location affected by violent extremism mean that empirical and causal explanations for radicalization are hard to assert. Violent extremists are diverse in psychology and sociology and tend to follow individualized, context-specific pathways towards violence. This makes it difficult to definitively answer the questions of how and why a minority of individuals in a specific country joined Daesh, for example. This challenge is made particularly acute in the absence of a sample of violent extremists to interview

1 This piece draws on Pearson's chapter on the milieu approach in Elizabeth Pearson, Emily Winterbotham, and Katherine Brown. *Countering Violent Extremism: Making Gender Matter* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

2 J.M. Berger, *Researching Violent Extremism: The State of Play* (Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network, 2019).

and without longitudinal studies and ethnographic fieldwork to conduct.³ One of the biggest challenges to conducting research on violent extremism is, therefore, technical: data is difficult to come by.

In the absence of easy access to radicalized individuals, many studies rely on secondary-source data⁴ and might, therefore, lack the context-specific data key to understanding radicalization processes.⁵ The question therefore arises: what is the value in researching radicalization if we can't access the radicalized? This chapter addresses this technical issue and provides a solution—albeit an imperfect one—to the challenge of generating original data about violent extremism without interviewing violent extremists. It also addresses a related key research challenge—participant fatigue, which is particularly prevalent in research on jihadist extremism. The approach outlined in this chapter seeks instead to empower local communities, acknowledging the radicalization expertise resident within those communities, rather than imposing “expert” knowledge from the government or other elite institutions in a unidirectional manner.

The chapter outlines a research methodology employed by RUSI known as the milieu approach. The approach takes into consideration the context in which radicalization takes place and is based on engagement through research with a *milieu*, or broad community base. The approach draws on a concept devised by Malthaner and Waldmann (2014)⁶ who use the term “radical milieu” to describe the community in which radicalization takes place. While Malthaner and Waldmann understand the milieu as a narrow community sharing some values with extremists, RUSI’s approach engages the wider community affected by radicalization and acts of violence. We apply this understanding to research on violent extremism, conducting research in the communities and areas most affected by radicalization and violent extremist activity. Ultimately, the approach seeks to recognize local knowledge, applying focus group methods to enable communities to safely share knowledge and concerns.

The chapter details the methodology behind the radical milieu approach, drawing on three key research case studies focused on jihadist violent extremism.⁷ These include: a five-country study (UK, Canada, France, Germany, and the Netherlands) on the gender dynamics of violent extremism and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), research on radicalization among IDPs and host communities in Iraq, and research on the radicalization of Central Asian labor migrants in Russia. The chapter outlines the benefits of the milieu approach, which include accessing individuals with direct experience of radicalization whilst exploring the context and shared grievances among people in areas where radicalization happened.

3 Mohammed Elshimi et al., *Understanding the Factors Contributing to Radicalisation Among Central Asian Labour Migrants in Russia* (London: RUSI, 2018).

4 Andrew Glazzard et al., *Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review* (London: RUSI, 2015).

5 Andrew Glazzard, Sasha Jespersen, and Emily Winterbotham, *Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism: Literature Review* (London: RUSI, 2015): 46.

6 Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann, “The Radical Milieu: Conceptualizing the Supportive Social Environment of Terrorist Groups,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 12 (2014): 979–98.

7 The five-country research study also included research on the far right.

The authors acknowledge the limitations of the milieu approach. The approach deprioritizes interviews with violent extremists. A key concern, not easily reconciled, is that in carrying out radical milieu research we unavoidably reproduce some of the worst mistakes of P/CVE by following the contested logic of some programming: that grassroots Muslims communities naturally know more about violent extremism. Indeed, not all jihadist extremist actors emerge from Muslim communities, and it is important that P/CVE interventions recognize this. Despite these limitations, the methodology has enabled RUSI to gather primary data on jihadist extremism to advance our understanding of radicalization in a range of different countries and contexts. Therefore, we present here our lessons learned in this field—lessons that we hope others will be able to adapt, refine, and improve.

The chapter is structured as follows: the first section briefly introduces three case studies from which the study is drawn. The second section explores the challenges of conducting research on violent extremism, setting the stage for the third section, which introduces the theory underpinning the milieu approach. The fourth section outlines the different techniques of the approach, including how to mitigate the risks involved, how to access research participants, what research methods to use, and how to analyze the data. The conclusion summarizes key lessons and recommendations for conducting research using the milieu approach.

CASE STUDIES

The Radicalization of Central Asian Labor Migrants in Russia⁸

This research project, conducted in 2017, aimed to enhance the understanding of radicalization and violent extremism among labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in Russia. It developed an evidence base on factors that contribute to radicalization and violent extremism among those communities in Russia to improve policy on preventing violent extremism. The project also established the context of radicalization of labor migrants in Russia. The researchers conducted 218 interviews (67 Uzbeks, 83 Kyrgyz, and 68 Tajiks) with migrant labor workers, experts, and local officials in thirteen cities across seven regions in Russia, employing the milieu approach in the selection of research sites.

The Gender Dynamics of Violent Extremism & Countering Violent Extremism: A Five-country Study⁹

This comparative analysis explored not just women's roles, but the gender dynamics of radicalization and counter-radicalization in five contexts: Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United

8 Elshimi et al., *Understanding the Factors Contributing to Radicalisation Among Central Asian Labour Migrants in Russia*.

9 Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham, "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation: A Milieu Approach," *The RUSI Journal* 162, no. 3 (2017): 60–72.

Kingdom (UK). RUSI conducted qualitative field work between October 2015 and January 2016, inclusive, in ten cities where significant incidents of radicalization had occurred across those five countries. The research focused on Daesh-inspired extremism. Radicalization to extreme-right movements was secondary due to challenges in gathering data. The project mapped the gender dynamics of the radicalization of men, women, and teenagers who join radical movements and provided recommendations on how to engage with gender in work with the wider communities to counter violent extremism.¹⁰ Researchers conducted some 41 anonymous focus groups. In total, more than 217 people took part in the focus groups, including men, women, and youths aged 16 and over (for reasons of consent). Researchers also interviewed five families or mothers in families with children who had traveled or attempted to travel to Daesh's "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq. Additionally, the research teams carried out individual interviews with people working in P/CVE delivery either for local authorities or in civil society organizations, as well as journalists with a knowledge of the field.

Radicalization and Mobilization in Iraq

This unpublished study took place in fourteen communities in six governorates of Iraq—Baghdad, Basra, Diyala, Erbil, Kirkuk, and Sulaymaniyah—between March and May 2017. The research aimed to better understand the Iraqi landscape and Iraqi community dynamics in relation to extremism, radicalization, and mobilization. It explored recruitment into a range of different paramilitary or armed groups including Daesh. It also aimed to inform policymakers' understanding about the effects of widespread mobilization and radicalization into these groups on sectarianism, demobilization, and future cycles of violence.

The research, therefore, explores people's lived experiences, perceptions, and beliefs, which called for a primarily qualitative methodology. This led to the production of fourteen separate community profiles based on interviews conducted with 220 men and women in the 14 communities and 38 focus groups. This research, in contrast to the others, also included 28 interviews with members of armed groups, excluding Daesh, in an effort to understand individual pathways into armed groups and contrast these experiences and narratives with broader community understandings of mobilization and recruitment.

SETTING THE STAGE: RESEARCHING VIOLENT EXTREMISTS

Research on violent extremism should increase our understanding of radicalization processes and the context in which these take place. If P/CVE programs are to adequately respond to the contextual factors of violent extremism, they should focus on identifying causality (to the extent possible).

Radicalization is a contested term with various definitions, but it is commonly understood as a non-linear, fluid, and often idiosyncratic social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commit-

¹⁰ Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown, *Countering Violent Extremism: Making Gender Matter*.

ment to extremist ideologies.¹¹ If radicalization is recognized as an individual and complex process, where access to violent extremists is restricted, it begs the question: what is the value in researching radicalization if we can't access the radicalized? Access to data may be restricted for a number of reasons. Some individuals may no longer live in the chosen research site, may be under criminal investigation, or may be facing prosecution and, therefore, beyond the access of researchers. Other individuals may be unwilling or afraid to engage with researchers. As a result, a majority of studies that rely on secondary-source data and research on violent extremism can often appear impressionistic or biased and lack the context-specific data key to understanding the radicalization process.¹²

In the absence of strong empirical data, particularly outside Western contexts,¹³ radicalization studies (at least until recently) embodied an implicit assumption that what works for a terrorist dataset in Western Europe also works in the Middle East and North Africa, for example. Yet context-specific research on violent extremism is intrinsic to furthering our understanding, as concepts such as radicalization and violent extremism often mean different things to different people in different regions, communities, and contexts. In fact, critics point to the dangers of the concept of radicalization given that it emphasizes the individual and, to some extent, the ideology while underplaying the wider circumstances—root causes, grievances, and social factors.¹⁴

Though academics and policymakers debate the extent to which root causes or grievances are causative factors or merely serve to justify or legitimize violent extremism, they are widely accepted to at least contribute to radicalization processes.¹⁵ Exploring these broader factors, which may affect many people—not just the radicalized individual—focuses attention on the concept of shared grievances, shared experiences, and the context where radicalization takes place. Extremist groups reach out to wide pools of people and are known to specifically target potentially aggrieved “like-minds”.¹⁶ If our preventive efforts to counter radicalization are to resonate, and ultimately succeed, they need to emerge from accurate understandings of the issues communities face.

In fact, access to a cohort of violent extremists might not inevitably lead to a greater understanding of the reasons an individual decides to support violent extremism. In Afghanistan and in Pakistan, Ladbury found that although young men become Taliban combatants for a range of reasons (religious sentiment as well as financial gain, protection, and tribe-based allegiances), their peers can radicalize them into

11 This definition is adapted from the European Union's brochure, *STRIVE for Development: Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism* (revised edition, 2016), for details of the EU's P/CVE programming.

12 Andrew Glazzard, Sasha Jespersen, and Emily Winterbotham, *Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism: Literature Review* (London: RUSI, 2015): 46.

13 Ibid.

14 Mark Sedgwick, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 4 (2010): 479–94; John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge, 2014; Glazzard et al., *Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism*.

15 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*, (New York, NY: UNDP, 2017).

16 Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010): 797–814; Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 7–36.

presenting their cause *only* in terms of Islam and conceptualizing their struggle *only* in terms of jihad.¹⁷ In this explanation, and following Sageman’s model of radicalization into jihadist groups,¹⁸ ideological radicalization happens *after* mobilization or recruitment, not as a cause. This tendency was also noted in our Iraq study: respondents tended to identify their reasons for joining armed groups in ideological or utopian terms, irrespective of their original motivations.

The discussion above does not downplay the significance of conducting research with radicalized individuals. Much of the literature on the limitations of existing research emphasizes the relative paucity of primary source data and recommends more focus on accessing it.¹⁹ Those opportunities should rightly be pursued. However, even when violent extremists discuss their paths into groups, their narratives may not be accurate or complete—primary data can be augmented through research on the wider context of the radicalization process.

THE MILIEU APPROACH

The milieu approach devised by RUSI had four aims:

- To establish the context in which radicalization takes place,
- To understand the possible contributing factors in an individual’s decision to engage with a violent movement,
- To reframe communities impacted by P/CVE practices as people with knowledge, and
- To empower those communities to share their knowledge in order to contest existing practices.

The term milieu is used here to describe the broadest communities from which violent actors emerge. “Pyramid” models of radicalization conceived initially by McCauley & Moskalenko,²⁰ understand that while very few people become terrorist actors, the terrorist network is larger. Networks include people with roles that do not involve carrying out the final attack. Those people are drawn from a yet wider com-

17 Sarah Ladbury, *Women and Extremism: The Association of Women and Girls with Jihadi Groups and Implications for Programming*, Independent paper prepared for the Department of International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office UK Department of International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2015).

18 See Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

19 For more on the limitations of terrorism research, see Adam Dolnik, ed., *Conducting Terrorism Field Research: A Guide* (London: Routledge, 2013); Andrew Silke, “The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13, no. 4 (2001); John Horgan, “The Case for First-Hand Research,” in *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, ed. Andrew Silke, (London: Routledge, 2004), 73–99; James Khalil, “A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 4 (2017): 429–43; Peter Neumann and Scott Kleinman, “How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research?” *Democracy and Security* 9, no. 4 (2013): 360–82.

20 Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008):415–33.

munity of people who do not actively support terrorism, but who might have sympathies for its causes or its actors. This is the *radical milieu*—the “social setting” of radicalization.²¹

In this chapter the milieu engaged is much broader still and should not be understood as supportive or potentially supportive of terrorism. The concept of the radical milieu in P/CVE terms encompasses the community regarded as “vulnerable” to radicalization. In practice, this “community” is often constituted of other diverse communities—families, people of faith, and youth, for instance. They can also be vulnerable to P/CVE practices and their underlying assumptions. RUSI engages with these people in its research on radicalization on the basis that they may feel targeted by counter-radicalization projects and research practices, as well as the consequences of young people joining Daesh or other groups. The so-called *milieu approach* prioritizes ordinary men and women who constitute these communities and their views and experiences.²²

Originally designed by Pearson for the case study conducted with Winterbotham on gender and violent extremism (detailed above),²³ the methodology is rooted in existing literature and aims to explore people’s experiences of extremism in relation to the communities they inhabit. While people living in these communities may not be directly involved in or impacted by violent extremism, their contribution is not purely theoretical. The lived experiences of these research participants are impacted by radicalization in concrete ways: people they know of have been recruited or radicalized and local places they frequent or inhabit are particular sites of radicalization. Individuals in the milieu may also share some of the structural or social grievances, or be able to give insights into, the potential incentives underlying radicalization based on their own lived experiences and own knowledge of events affecting friends, colleagues, and family members. They may also be directly affected by everyday discourses related to extremism and terrorism. They are the communities that governments have repeatedly sought to engage to prevent terrorism. As such, their perceptions regarding what is likely to work (or not) in terms of prevention efforts is highly important.²⁴

The Milieu Approach Method

The milieu approach is based on the understanding that if research on violent extremism is conducted in geographical locations where significant cases of radicalization have occurred, it will include participants who could produce knowledge of radicalization based on their own direct or indirect experiences, such as the lived experiences of friends, colleagues, and family members. RUSI’s studies evidence the value of the milieu approach as a methodology. In the gender and violent extremism five-country project, no interviews were conducted with those who had been recruited or radicalized. Despite this, half of the focus groups (13 separate groups) in communities affected by radicalization into violent jihadist groups—

21 Malthaner and Waldmann, “The Radical Milieu,” 979.

22 Pearson, Winterbotham and Brown, *Countering Violent Extremism*.

23 Ibid. Thanks to Dr. Katherine Brown for providing much discussion and input into the idea of the milieu approach and its advantages in the field.

24 Ibid.

including Daesh—included participants with some experience of radicalization in their family or community. Research participants were also targeted by or had some contact with recruiters. In France, for example, a girl described how a Daesh recruiter contacted her online.²⁵ In Germany, parents and young people described recruiters approaching teenaged boys in the street.²⁶

Similarly, in the radicalization of Central Asian labor migrants study, 10% of respondents from Uzbekistan had first or second-hand knowledge of radicalization processes. In Iraq, though it was not always possible to gain accurate information due to security concerns about naming Daesh, it was clear that a significant proportion of research participants knew people who had joined the group in particular areas. For example, in Sulaymaniyah, 8 out of 27 people knew members of Daesh. In one IDP camp in Diyala, 6 of 14 interviewees knew someone who had joined Daesh, whilst focus groups included people with direct experience of living under Daesh.

The milieu approach also rests on the concept of shared grievances. Conducting research in the wider population or milieu could shed light on broader societal grievances. The studies implemented demonstrated that rich sources of information come from the communities that exist around some radicalized people and their families. They are a source not just of opinion but experiences accessible only in the local context.

At RUSI, we address the issue of radicalization through an analytical framework based on a typology that groups factors mobilizing people towards violent extremism into four categories: structural motivations, enabling factors, group and network dynamics, and individual incentives.²⁷ Causality, we argue, is rarely the result of one factor. Instead, causality is understood through identifying correlations between violent extremism on the one hand and structural factors, individual incentives, and enabling and group factors on the other.

RUSI applies this model to research on violent extremism. Following the above typology, structural motivators by definition affect many more people than those eventually joining an extremist group. The research is based on the belief that the same structural or social grievances will likely affect some research participants in the radical milieu in a similar way to radicalized individuals. It is also possible to gain information on enabling factors from a wider community around “radicalized” individuals—for instance, people in the community may know of radical preachers or sites of radicalization. The milieu approach, therefore, starts to build a picture of the radicalization process, and also recognizes the knowledge, agency, and expertise in the communities around the radicalized.

All of the studies mentioned gathered information on structural factors that contribute to violent extremism. In the gender and violent extremism project, participants suggested that radicalization was embed-

25 Pearson and Winterbotham, “Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation.”

26 Ibid.

27 This model is an adapted model proposed by James Khalil and Martine Zeuthen, *Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction: A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation*, RUSI Whitehall Report 2-16, June 2016.

ded within broader contexts where gender norms influence responses to Daesh propaganda. Though all participants rejected Daesh, Muslim women participants described perceived injustice, marginalization, exclusion, and experiences of Islamophobia as possible factors in the radicalization of young women in particular. Participants described a milieu in which they believed Daesh messages addressing issues of women’s marginalization in the West had a chance of resonating. Some women expressed empathy for others who had traveled to join the group due to this, while opposing Daesh, and the women who joined them.²⁸

In Iraq, though all interviewees also condemned Daesh, Sunni Arab participants argued the group had emerged under the pretext of protecting Sunnis. In areas where the government was accused of targeting Sunni Arab communities with house raids, arrests, and detention, it created a perception of sectarian-driven discrimination and repression. Anecdotes about people who had been radicalized further evidence these broader community understandings:

I know someone who worked in coal farms. He was falsely accused of killing a person in the army. Then the military forces immediately executed him and tied his body to a military vehicle and roamed the streets, prompting his younger brother to join Daesh because of the suffering and injustice [caused] by the Iraqi army.

This approach proved to generate valuable information on radicalization processes and experiences. However, it is not without challenges. The ensuing sections outline practices we have employed at RUSI to overcome the methodological challenges with data collection.

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE: OPERATIONALIZING THE MILIEU APPROACH

1 **Choosing Communities of Participation:** Research Site Selection & Data Gathering

SELECTING SITES & NAVIGATING “RISK FACTORS”

One of the biggest challenges in applying the milieu approach is ethical: conducting research in the milieu around radicalized individuals can risk reproducing the stigmatizing logic of P/CVE practices. The targeting of P/CVE interventions has long been contentious. For those seeking the causes of violent extremism in the West, there is little compelling evidence to justify the broad community-based approaches to P/CVE that target large populations of immigrant-heritage Muslims. Many Muslims have contested their

28 Pearson and Winterbotham, “Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation.”

construction by governments as a suspect community,²⁹ and rejected the logic of P/CVE projects as securitizing and alienating them.³⁰ The implicit assumption of those implementing many P/CVE activities that Muslims are the demographic most at risk of radicalization not only stigmatizes Muslim communities, but risks ignoring non-Muslim individuals or groups vulnerable to radicalization.³¹

This was a particular challenge during our five-country study on gender and radicalization. Once again, we as researchers were engaging with these same “Muslim communities” to talk about P/CVE practices, even though high numbers of converts had traveled to join Daesh.³² The P/CVE logic is that violent jihadist groups seeking to recruit in the West target propaganda to Muslim-heritage families with an immigrant background and that, in terms of numbers, those involved in violent jihadist plots more often come from that background.³³ To move beyond the stigmatization of particular communities, we ensured that site selection was determined not by demographics, but by engaging with the geographical hubs where radicalization had occurred. The sites selected were known to be confronting radicalization issues.

Targeting sites of radicalization and not demographics also resisted anticipating who was vulnerable to radicalization, and who might have “insider” knowledge of what radicalization means and is. This meant that we came across and subsequently interviewed three mothers in Germany who were not Muslim and whose children had converted to Islam and subsequently became radicalized. The women provided an important perspective on assumptions about radicalization and P/CVE practices. These mothers revealed their unique experiences in grappling with a challenge that they felt they had no exposure to and for which they tended to be excluded from discussions around because they were not Muslim. They also highlighted their perceptions of limited support mechanisms available, including that of the local mosque and local community initiatives, because they were non-Muslims and therefore not the immediate targets of P/CVE activities.³⁴ The women’s interviews revealed the ways in which the framing of radicalization links particular (immigrant) experiences with extremism and excludes white youth or other youth without a Muslim heritage from discussion of vulnerability.

In the context of radicalization to Daesh, which saw a significant minority of converts travel to Iraq and Syria, this revealed an important gap in P/CVE provision. For these mothers, the effects of a racialized P/

29 Jamie Bartlett and Jonathan Birdwell, *From Suspects to Citizens: Preventing Violent Extremism in a Big Society* (London: Demos, 2010); Marie Breen-Smyth, “Theorising the ‘Suspect Community’: Counterterrorism, Security Practices and the Public Imagination,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7, no. 2 (2013): 223–40; Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London/New York: Verso Books, 2014); Naaz Rashid, “Giving the Silent Majority a Stronger Voice? Initiatives to Empower Muslim Women as Part of the UK’s ‘War on Terror’,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 4 (2014): 589–604.

30 Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming*; Stuart Croft, *Securitizing Islam: Identity and the Search for Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Pearson, Winterbotham and Brown, *Countering Violent Extremism*.

31 Emily Winterbotham and Elizabeth Pearson, “Different Cities, Shared Stories: A Five-Country Study Challenging Assumptions Around Muslim Women and CVE Interventions,” *The RUSI Journal* 161, no. 5 (2016): 54–65.

32 Pearson, Winterbotham and Brown, *Countering Violent Extremism*.

33 Joana Cook and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to Diaspora: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2018); Petter Nesser, “Toward an Increasingly Heterogeneous Threat: A Chronology of Jihadist Terrorism in Europe 2008–2013,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 5 (2014): 440–56.

34 Pearson and Winterbotham, “Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation.”

CVE discourse and practice were to exclude them from access to knowledge, and to put their sons—and therefore perhaps wider society—at risk. Furthermore, the women echoed the suggestion from focus groups within Muslim communities that radicalization was not solely a problem for “Muslim communities” to address; it was an issue that affected youth across society, albeit a tiny minority. Radicalization was conceived, therefore, as a whole-of-society issue.

Research on radicalization aims to explore why, how, and where people radicalize, to identify so-called “risk factors” and to distinguish those who might be more vulnerable to radicalization. A second dimension to the concept of at-risk is the idea that a person needs special care, support, or protection because of the threat of violent extremism. For example, a “safeguarding” discourse is prevalent in P/CVE in the UK.³⁵ Meanwhile, RUSI research on the radicalization of Central Asian labor migrants suggested that illegal migrants in Russia were more at risk to radicalization and exposed to a greater range of vulnerabilities than legal migrants. At the same time, however, the paper observed that caution must be exercised: the Saint Petersburg Metro suicide bomber, Akbarzhon Jalilov, had Russian citizenship.³⁶ In the five-country study, friendship groups emerged as important in radicalization. In the Netherlands the role of friendship circles was strongly emphasized, and participants described how groups of friends became interested in Daesh together and encouraged one another.³⁷

DATA SECURITY & PARTICIPANT RIGHTS TO PRIVACY

Identifying risk factors is inevitably sensitive. Risk-factors should not be used to profile or stigmatize particular groups. Additionally, in carrying out research on radicalization it is important to ensure participants do not come under increased scrutiny from both violent extremist groups and government actors. Our research in Russia on the radicalization of Central Asian labor migrants ran the risk of supporting a securitized rhetoric at that time, framing migrants as a threat. Several interviewees stated that police attention had increased since the Saint Petersburg bombing of April 2017. Others worried about police raids and complained that migrants were being treated “as if we are all guilty.”³⁸

In Russia, anticipating that both the research teams and participants might face increased attention from local authorities due to the research, we worked to mitigate this by seeking permission to conduct research. Though this could carry certain risks in raising awareness of the study itself, we deemed this risk less than if the authorities were to learn of the study at a later date. The study was framed so as to reassure local authorities that we were discussing issues relevant to migrants, including issues of radicalization, but that we would not be gathering or recording any intelligence. Research participants were

35 See Lynn Davies, “Security, Extremism and Education: Safeguarding or Surveillance?” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 64, no. 1 (2016):1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2015.1107022>; Boora Singh, *Safeguarding from Extremism: A New Approach Post 7/7* (Paragon Publishing, 2015).

36 Elshimi et al., *Understanding the Factors Contributing to Radicalisation Among Central Asian Labour Migrants in Russia*.

37 Pearson and Winterbotham, “Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation.” This echoes the research of Marc Sageman, and his “bunch of guys” radicalization model, see: Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

38 Ekaterina interviewee in Elshimi et al., *Understanding the Factors Contributing to Radicalisation Among Central Asian Labour Migrants in Russia*.

also assured that their participation and their identities and information were confidential, as we explain further below.

In other contexts, without obfuscating the intended aims of the project, we avoided discussing issues that are too sensitive, at least at the outset. For example, in Iraq, research took place in a conflict context. Local research teams requested that questions about Daesh specifically would not be asked. In such sensitive contexts, we found that the focus of initial data collection efforts should be on building rapport with project beneficiaries. With sufficient trust, researchers were able to adopt a more sensitive line of questioning. To build trust and relationships and ensure transparency, we worked with a local team, one known to the communities, and were able to remain present in these areas for prolonged periods of time to gather data. Building relationships and trust takes time. Where time and resources are limited, it may not be feasible nor appropriate to conduct this type of research.

All research projects on sensitive topics such as violent extremism face data privacy concerns. Given these concerns, the identity of participants must remain confidential—participants cannot be directly identified. We have employed various tools and guidelines for securing participant data. First, it is critical to separate personally Identifiable Information (PII) from all other data sources as early as possible. In RUSI’s research, participants are coded immediately so that their PII data is not stored. If working with external research organizations or consultants, it is therefore important to train them in this practice from the outset. It is also standard practice to destroy multiple copies of research transcripts once the research is completed. RUSI also often refrains from naming the specific communities, districts, or areas where we conduct research to further protect research participants’ anonymity. For example, only countries, not cities, were named in the five-country study. Cities were named in the radicalization of Central Asian labor migrants, but specific areas of those cities remained unidentified. In the Iraq study, only the governorates were named, and sites were labeled “urban” or “rural”.

ACCESS & SENSITIVE SUBJECTS

Concerns about security can create hinder access to research participants. RUSI has tried two approaches: (1) going through gatekeepers known to the community and conducting the research ourselves, or (2) working with research teams with local knowledge and access to communities. In the gender and violent extremism project, not all researchers were from the countries or areas of the research sites. We therefore decided to work primarily through gatekeepers (mosques, community groups, women’s groups) to identify participants. All research subjects were selected on their willingness to participate and engage in the subject area. This approach was challenging, and the recruitment experience became an important part of the research process. For instance, gatekeepers reported that people suffered “research fatigue” with the subject matter and with what the participants felt was the constant association of Islam and Muslim communities with issues related to Daesh—we explore this further in the next section. Another important finding was that people did not attend some of the focus groups. At times, a minority of gatekeepers—understandably—were not willing to facilitate access to contacts without assurance that there would be some benefit, either to the community, the group, or the gatekeeper because of these issues. Gaining access to respondents was, therefore, difficult. Nevertheless, this process became a crucial part

of the research findings. Importantly, participants knew they could engage honestly with the researchers, all of whom were radicalization experts. The quality of the data gathered therefore was higher compared to what it may have been if we had not taken this approach.

The second approach we adopted is based on the acknowledgement that it is sometimes difficult for external researchers to conduct research on sensitive subjects, including radicalization. There is often local hostility to research conducted by “outsiders”. We address this by working with local researchers who are known to the community or have networks they can draw on but are not usually radicalization experts. In the Central Asian labor migrants study, interviewers selected respondents on the ground, either going to areas where labor migrants were known to gather or reaching out to their personal networks to identify labor migrants. In Iraq, the research teams knew the communities well and were able to identify potential interviewees—self-selecting and attained through a process of snowball sampling and word-of-mouth. In the five-country study, the work of a Dutch researcher with both expertise on radicalization and excellent access to local communities produced rich data. Participants opened up about issues faced due to the loss of a number of local youths to Daesh, including their feelings of frustration and depression at their inability to prevent it.

There are limitations to relying on local researchers, not least the absence of oversight of data collection methods. In some instances, outside a Western context, the quality of data gathered was not as high as it could have been with another approach. Still, in many contexts, the local connections these researchers maintain are vital and their local understanding enhances the quality of data gathered. To ensure the quality of the data, we recommend working closely with local researchers during data collection. In the Iraq study we adopted a participatory approach that focused on building the capacity of local researchers. We communicated and explained not only the project methods but spent time to train the researchers on the theory of radicalization. We also developed research tools together and allowed time for joint reflection and analysis of findings.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This section discussed the implications of site selection, the identification of research participants and the various ethical and security-related implications of this type of work. This can be summed up in four key recommendations:

- Avoid stigmatization by adopting a geographical not a demographic approach to site selection. This approach also enables the participation of previously unidentified individuals or groups of individuals in the research.
- Assess the risks posed by this type of research for all individuals and communities involved. In some cases, it may be better to inform local authorities and be transparent (to the degree that is possible) about research objectives to avoid raising suspicions. In other cases, it may be wise to avoid asking questions that are too sensitive until trust is gained on both sides. Building and gaining trust requires time, commitment, on-the-ground presence, and, consequently, resources.

- When conducting research as outsiders, spend time gaining the trust of the local gatekeepers and ensuring a collaborative approach. When working with local researchers, we recommend a participatory approach that builds local research capacity.
- Protect the identity of research participants—safeguarding participant identities is essential. We found it useful to code participants rather than recording PII data. We also strongly suggest against identifying individual research sites.

2 Research Methods: Interactive & Participatory Approaches

Research methods should be designed to suit the research context. When conducting research in Western countries, we had to confront the challenge of research fatigue.³⁹ Muslim participants in the gender and radicalization study were tired of being framed by governments in extractive terms with the expectation of compliance. Potential Muslim focus group participants we contacted often responded with criticism of these agendas and told us that we were guilty of adopting the usual assumptions: that Muslim communities have the answers and are somehow closer to the problem of Daesh or Al Qaeda.⁴⁰

To overcome research fatigue, the research had to create space for communities to speak openly about their concerns and provide a platform for participants to feel their views would be transmitted to P/CVE implementers and policymakers. It was important that we actively listened to people and enabled them to contest their designation as suspect communities and articulate their resistance to the research. We selected focus groups, a research method we felt was appropriate to facilitate a naturalistic environment and generate discussion.⁴¹ Carrying out the research validated our assumptions—we found that focus groups created a discursive space where participants felt able to share opinions collectively.⁴² However, as we later confirmed, a skilled facilitator is important to be able to encourage discussion whilst ensuring that the conversation stays on topic. When interviews were conducted, they followed a semi-structured format with a set of fixed and open-ended questions.

Both methods ensured that participants were free to take the discussion in different directions and discuss issues that were relevant to them. As a result, we gathered information we otherwise did not consider on the role of the media, concerns about child grooming, and the role of the English language in migrant communities, as well as the data on terrorism that we originally sought.⁴³ This method also

39 Tom Clark, “‘We’re Over-researched Here!’ Exploring Accounts of Research Fatigue within Qualitative Research Engagements,” *Sociology* 42, no. 5 (2008): 955–59.

40 Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown, *Countering Violent Extremism*.

41 Nancy Grudens-Schuck, Beverlyn Lundy Allen, and Kathlene Larson, *Methodology Brief: Focus Group Fundamentals* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Extension Community and Economic Development Publications, 2004): 12.

42 Synneve Dahlin Ivanoff and John Hultberg, “Understanding the Multiple Realities of Everyday Life: Basic Assumptions in Focus-group Methodology,” *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy* 13, no. 2 (2006): 130; Frances Montell, “Focus Group Interviews: A New Feminist Method,” *NWSA Journal* 11, no. 1 (1999): 44–71; Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown *Countering Violent Extremism*.

43 Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown, *Countering Violent Extremism*.

allowed participants in contexts, such as the UK, to develop the conversation in a way they were comfortable with. For instance, in the UK, support for Daesh is criminalized, which made participants nervous. This nervousness became part of a natural focus group conversation, led by participants who talked about the ways in which discussion of Daesh had become “taboo” in Muslim communities, even in the home. This was an important finding for reflections on the possibilities for P/CVE approaches that rely on open and honest communication around Daesh to succeed.

The focus group also served as a space for communities to express resistance to research objectives and government preventive efforts. In some cases, gatekeepers told us that participants would only take part if they could express resistance to the themes of the research. We told them this was fine, and indeed, found that much anger was expressed against government, the media, and researcher focus on Muslims because of security issues. This research fatigue was evident across country contexts. In the UK and Germany, gatekeepers and participants routinely asked if we would allow participants to challenge state approaches, dominant narratives, and our own work. In many cases the voluntary participation in focus groups actually depended on this guarantee of freedom to anonymously speak out against state, institutional, and media practices. Those making this request also expressed anger over the continued association of Islam with extremism and the need to conduct more research on the issue of radicalization.⁴⁴ However, participants also described feelings of catharsis at the ability to express these feelings, see their feelings noted by researchers, and know that their resistive narratives would be part of our report and included in later academic work.

The contrast with RUSI’s research in Iraq demonstrates, however, the need for context sensitivity in identifying appropriate research methods. Contrary to academic understanding that focus groups can help discuss sensitive issues, in Iraq, research participants were reluctant to speak openly in groups for fears they would be reported. Therefore, we conducted fewer focus groups and primarily utilized individual interviews. A pilot study was also conducted in each governorate to mitigate against security concerns and to inform and tailor research methods and interview guides. In conducting research on P/CVE and radicalization, one particular method cannot be relied upon for use in every context; each research strategy is only one tool from a range of techniques to be applied according to the needs of the context.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This section reflected on the significance of selecting research methods, which we recommend be contextually defined. Specifically:

- In some contexts, to address issues of research fatigue and encourage a discursive approach to data gathering, focus groups can be a useful tool, enabling the expression of resistance identities and creating a discursive space where participants felt free to express a range of views, including challenging the research project itself. To successfully employ this method, however, requires a skilled and trusted facilitator.

44 Ibid.

- In other contexts, particularly where there are imminent security concerns, participants may not feel comfortable talking in a group. Individual interviews may, therefore, be more appropriate. These interviews can be semi-structured with open-ended questions to ensure that the participant can take the interview in the direction they want.

3 Analyzing the Data: Battling Bias

Interviews with the wider milieu and the radical milieu, rather than with violent extremists themselves, leave the data open to analytical challenges. Information provided may be based on limited information, hearsay, limited perceptions and prejudiced assumptions. Data can also be affected by social desirability bias: the desire of respondents to be viewed favorably by researchers and give socially or politically appropriate responses (though these limitations can also arise when interviewing violent extremists themselves). As suggested above, given that violent extremist views and even extremist views are outlawed in many countries, respondents may hesitate to give honest responses regarding their attitudes and behaviors because they feel embarrassed, judged, and, in some cases, persecuted. Recognizing this bias is often difficult. To address this, researchers should remain conscious that bias may present and ensure that the analytical process triangulates different data sources to expose any biases or inconsistencies in the data gathered.

The milieu approach classifies participant data in four ways, outlined in [Figure 1](#), each with a different relationship to radicalization and different evidence.

Figure 1: Participant Data Classifications⁴⁵

Group 1	Participants with direct engagement with radical movements.
Group 2	Participants who know someone who has been radicalized or recruited.
Group 3	Participants who have heard of someone who has been radicalized or recruited (through second-hand sources or informed opinion, e.g. expert opinion).
Group 4	Other participants who have no personal knowledge (that is to say, knowledge obtained from the media, word of mouth, or hearsay) of radicalization or recruitment.

⁴⁵ Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown, *Countering Violent Extremism*; Elshimi et al., *Understanding the Factors Contributing to Radicalisation Among Central Asian Labour Migrants in Russia*.

The views of participants in Groups 1 and 2 are typically prioritized, but rare. To compare lived and perceived experiences of radicalization, data from so-called expert participants is subsequently contrasted with interviews or focus groups based on indirect knowledge. RUSI's gender and violent extremism project included interviews in Germany with the non-Muslim mothers of young converted men who had been prevented from travelling to Daesh. In the Netherlands, we conducted interviews with the Muslim-heritage families of some of those who had successfully travelled. These in-depth case study interviews with people from very different backgrounds were compared and further triangulated with research findings from community focus groups to strengthen our analysis. The consistency in stories heard from these case studies about how their children had radicalized (quickly, hard to notice, stemming from feelings of discrimination, alienation, etc.) alongside the perceptions of radicalization expressed by participants in Groups 3 or 4, strengthened our ultimate research findings.

This reflects the benefits of the milieu approach: even those without direct experience of radicalization tend to have informed opinions due to their exposure in the areas they inhabit. The aim here was not always to produce veracity through findings, as this was not always possible. In dealing with family narratives about the radicalization of children, the research was able to establish facts, including, for instance: the speed of radicalization, who made the contact to Daesh, where first contact was made, and what action the police took. Families and communities often reported these same details. However, we also wanted to understand community perceptions of radicalization motivations and processes. P/CVE relies on working with community assumptions. We noted the often-strong gendered assumptions that were made, as well as the differences in perception between, for instance, younger and older women. Our research provided detailed information on the logistics of radicalization, but also on the likely community responses to particular P/CVE narratives to inform a more holistic picture of radicalization dynamics.

The triangulation process also enabled us to collect information that we later determined to be unsubstantiated. For example, in the research on the radicalization of Central Asian labor migrants, interviewees who had no direct experience of radicalization (i.e. Groups 3 or 4) emphasized the significance of economic hardship, poverty, or material incentives in radicalization processes. When comparing these opinions with data from Group 2 interviewees, RUSI's analysis observed that money and material incentives were not an explanation; rather ideational, ideological, and spiritual factors featured in their responses.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, understanding community perceptions is crucial to the prospect of successful P/CVE work.

We also found it beneficial to complement community interviews with expert interviews, particularly with P/CVE intervention providers, in the interest of further triangulating data. Experts, primarily practitioners, provide contextual working knowledge of the process of radicalization and the people being radicalized in a particular area, from their own experience. This data can be compared to the narratives elicited in focus groups or other interviews, of those who know people who have radicalized and broader community understandings of radicalization. In addition, RUSI always conducts literature reviews at the

46 Elshimi et al., *Understanding the Factors Contributing to Radicalisation Among Central Asian Labour Migrants in Russia*.

beginning of its research projects. Findings from academic literature are then used to draw comparisons with our own research findings throughout the process of analysis.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This final section explores the data analysis process. We acknowledge that limitations exist in all forms of research. In our research, we find it important to recognize the existence of social desirability bias as well as the different experiences and knowledge of research participants. To overcome these challenges, we recommend the following:

- To resist presenting perceptions or assumptions that may be wrong or biased, adopt a schema to categorize research participants that differentiates between their proximity to a radicalized individual or group of individuals (see Figure 1). This allows for the extrapolation of similarities and differences in the data and the identification of areas in which data is consistent—where conclusions can be drawn—and the observation of any inconsistencies stemming from bias or lack of information.
- Narratives do not always produce “truth”. While the facts and details of radicalization matter, P/CVE initiatives interact mainly with communities and their perceptions. Exploring and recording community perceptions, even when they are not necessarily based on fact, therefore, becomes as important a part of research as the gathering of verifiable information and facts.
- Employ a range of methods and include a diversity of data sources—secondary academic literature alongside primary data—to triangulate and verify information as much as possible. This does not need to be a never-ending process. Inconsistencies are usually relatively easy to identify when compared across sources. Peer-reviewed academic literature can also be used to interrogate data gathered or to suggest further avenues of research for future study.

CONCLUSION

The milieu approach is a valuable, but by no means perfect, research method. This chapter analyzed and suggested responses to the various conceptual and methodological issues that can arise during data collection and analysis. These include:

- Concerns about stigmatization, securitization, and the safety of research participants,
- Issues in data collection as external researchers versus working with local research teams,
- Issues concerning research fatigue, suspicion, hostility and fear among research participants, and
- Challenges in determining data validity and separating out “truth” from assumptions, biases, and prejudice.

A final challenge we raise here, and in the forthcoming book further detailing the milieu approach, is one that has implications for how many international stakeholders apply P/CVE policies themselves, as well as for further reflection and testing of the method.⁴⁷ The milieu approach was vital in exposing the assumptions involved in P/CVE initiatives and of participants to the fundamental definitions of terrorism and radicalization. This was evident in the resistance of Muslim communities to our research in some cases in the five-country project. It was also evident in the ways in which we were able to implement the approach. The five-country research project also engaged the milieu approach on issues of far-right extremism, yet with some difficulty. This is because the—white—communities around pockets of far-right or radical right violence did not consider themselves responsible for this minority activity. People in geographical locations affected by far-right extremism or white supremacy do not see this as their concern—simply on the basis of being white—and, consequently, were reluctant to engage in research. If, following this logic, they would be unlikely to participate in preventive community-based activities, why do we presume that Muslims should behave any differently? This clearly raises questions about the applicability, not of the approach, but of the assumptions of too many international P/CVE programs and policies.

The milieu approach is a valuable research tool. As this chapter reveals, it has enabled us to address the data gap in violent extremism research in a range of different country contexts. The approach works when based on an understanding of participatory consent. It draws on participatory methodologies and places the audience or the beneficiaries at the center of all discussions on knowledge development and sharing. Our participants frequently told researchers that there should be more such opportunities for similar guided discussions. We found that (Muslim) communities in areas where radicalization has taken place are concerned and want to engage, but they are alienated by governments and the media framing the debates around violent extremism. Engaging and gaining the trust otherwise stigmatized communities takes time and resources. The milieu approach works best when engagement with research participants takes place over an extended period of time. The approach is also enhanced by working with local actors—whether gatekeepers or research organizations—and ensuring that their insights are drawn into the processes of design and analysis. It is important that neither group perceives the data gathering process to be extractive, but a process facilitating the sharing of information or capacity. The success of the milieu approach therefore rests on engaging communities as sites of expertise and subjectivity, not simply in reductive terms as target populations, which is too often constructed in government interventions.

47 Pearson, Winterbotham, and Brown, *Countering Violent Extremism*.

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