“Yes, I can”: what is the role of perceived self-efficacy in violent online-radicalisation processes of “homegrown” terrorists?

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“Yes, I can”: what is the role of perceived self-efficacy in violent online-radicalisation processes of “homegrown” terrorists?

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ABSTRACT

Radicalisation is influenced by a multitude of factors such as situational, social and psychological factors, including social-cognitive processes. This article explores how homegrown extremists are influenced by their perceived agency and how the beliefs of their own abilities to change their situation are directly shaped by the online-propaganda they consume using ISIS propaganda as a case study. The article serves as an exploratory analysis of the potential explanatory qualities of Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy. This preliminary theoretical work explores how online-propaganda seeks to increase perceived personal self-efficacy to inspire action. The findings indicate that an increased focus on agency beliefs may facilitate a more holistic understanding of the psycho-social processes influencing radicalization and factors driving certain individuals to perpetrate violence while others do not. More research needs to be conducted, but this work is a first exploratory step in advancing our understanding of self-efficacy beliefs in the radicalization of homegrown extremists.

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Introduction

During the last two decades, we have witnessed an increasing focus on questions regarding radicalisation – its causes, facilitating conditions, mechanisms, consequences and countermeasures – by academics and practitioners alike. While the 1970s saw the search for a “terrorist personality”, 21st-century research is largely preoccupied with uncovering facilitating conditions for radicalisation or factors increasing susceptibility to extremist ideas. On the one hand, individual risk factors such as isolation, migration status, relative deprivation, personal crises or difficult family constellations are believed to create “cognitive openings” (Wiktorowicz, 2005) and thereby facilitate the receptiveness of these individuals to extremist or radical ideas. On the other hand, external social factors, especially the social networks and friend groups individuals are involved in, are seen as facilitating socialisation into an extremist mindset if extremist ideas are part of these network structures. Together individual risk factors and social conditions interplay to determine susceptibility to radicalisation. An additional focus has been placed on the role of specialised recruiters as well as the production and dissemination of propaganda, especially through social media. Recruiters can act as “fishermen” (Baaken & Schlegel, 2017), contacting “cognitively open” individuals and actively guiding their
radicalisation and recruitment processes. Propaganda is perceived almost as artificial fishermen, drawing individuals in by the use of frames that resonate with a specific target group (Benford & Snow, 2000), by constant repetition of these frames in social network “echo chambers” (von Behr, Reding, Edwards, & Gribbon, 2013), by using “cool” and modern language or designs and by arousing strong, corresponding emotions, which may drive radicalisation processes. Individuals are perceived as driven by external conditions to which they react with radicalisation. Radicalisation is therefore sometimes conceptualised similar to assessment of health risks (Bhui, Hicks, Lashey, & Jones, 2012), conditional on individual susceptibility and social exposure.

While external facilitating conditions are important and valuable as political violence does not originate in a vacuum, not only their direct influences on radicalisation but on individual cognition driving the radicalisation need to be examined. Their explanatory capacity regarding violent radicalisation is incomplete without an understanding of the social cognitive processes underpinning the processes of radicalisation. As humans, we are self-reflective and anticipating creatures, influenced but not absolutely determined by our environment. The decision to join an extremist organisation is at least partially a conscious choice. Propaganda and social influences may change an individual’s worldview, but taking action requires reflection, anticipation of consequences, a self-evaluation of actions and, maybe most importantly, it requires the belief that one is able not only to execute the action but that this action is worthwhile. In other words, terrorists are not merely driven by external conditions, but by cognitive evaluation processes and the belief in their own agency.

This article is concerned with the examination of agency-related concepts in the academic discourse and challenges the notion of radicalisation as a “public health risk” (Bhui et al., 2012). The focus is placed on the social cognitive processes facilitating violent or behavioural radicalisation of so-called “homegrown” extremists in an online context. Violent radicalisation is understood as the perpetration of violence, not as fulfilling one of the various supporting roles in terrorist organisations. It is a theoretical exploration of the usability of Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001a). The analysis should be read as a Weberian ideal type analysis focused on self-efficacy and not as a comprehensive discussion of factors facilitating radicalisation processes.

After a short review of the existing literature with regards to agentic perspectives and online-radicalisation, self-efficacy, as understood by Bandura, is examined and applied to violent online-radicalisation of associates of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). ISIS was chosen as a case study because radical Islam is arguably the biggest terrorist threat to Western nations (Bartlett, Birdwell, & King, 2010) and ISIS has, with its sophisticated online-propaganda machinery in various languages, been at the centre of online-radicalisation efforts (Milton, 2016). The focus is placed specifically on homegrown jihadists potentially radicalised through this propaganda because homegrown actors have become an increasingly dangerous issue in the West (King & Taylor, 2011), especially since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war (Schuurmann & Horgan, 2016). Although ISIS has significantly decreased in physical strength and its social media propaganda channels are increasingly policed since the military effort of the coalition forces, its previous success is likely to be taken as an example by other groups in the future on how to effectively use online communication for radicalisation purposes. It is, therefore, reasonable to examine the social cognitive aspects of online-radicalisation by focusing on ISIS. After outlining the
limitations of the work, it is concluded that self-efficacy is a promising concept to facilitate our understanding of radicalisation and shed light on the question of why certain people perpetrate violence while others, exposed to similar propaganda, do not.

**The wider discourse**

The body of research relating to radicalisation is rich and diverse, ranging from discussions of the many different definitions of the term (Schmid & Jongman, 2005) to root causes (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010) or models of radicalisation (e.g., Venhaus, 2010; Wiktorowicz, 2005). In recent years, studies have highlighted the role of the internet and social media communication technology in facilitating processes of radicalisation (Aly, Macdonald, Jarvis, & Chen, 2016; Neumann, 2013). The US Department of Justice (2014) defined online-radicalisation as a “process by which an individual is introduced to an ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from mainstream beliefs toward extreme views, primarily through the use of online media, including social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube”. This definition describes cognitive online-radicalization. While cognitive radicalisation is not necessarily a good predictor for violent behaviour (Guhl, 2018) and McCauley and Moskalenko (2014) even treat both violent and cognitive radicalisation as completely different “pyramids” of radicalisation, the present definition can easily be extended to behavioural radicalisation by adding that the beliefs acquired online then lead to taking violent action in the offline realm. This extended definition underpins the analysis in this article, which is concerned with how propaganda in the online sphere can lead to violent action by “homegrown” terrorists affiliated to ISIS. While there are some who are sceptical of the role of the internet in facilitating radicalisation (Benson, 2014; Bouhana & Wikström, 2011), others view it as a substantial factor in contemporary terrorism (Berger & Strathearn, 2013; Carter, Maher, & Neumann, 2014; Edwards & Gibbon, 2013; Koehler, 2014; McNicol, 2016; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Kaderbhai, 2017). Although terrorists are engaged in multiple activities online (Rudner, 2017), arguably one of the most important advantages of online presence is the increased reach and visibility, especially in terms of propaganda dissemination. Some individuals “virtually stumble into extremist propaganda” (Neumann, 2013, p. 435) and as the number of internet users increases so does the number of extremists whose radicalisation was influenced by their online activity (Gill et al., 2017).

Recent studies have examined specific conditions of virtual terrorist activity, including echo chambers (Winter, 2016) or virtual bubbles (Musawi, 2010) supporting radicalisation processes by constant repetition of extremist narratives, the platforms used by extremists online (Brandon, 2008; Mair, 2016; Milton, 2016; Musawi, 2010), and the manner in which ISIS developed content (Sardarnia & Safizadeh, 2017), published it across channels (Bloom, Hicham, & Horgan, 2017) and is likely to develop their online activity in the future (Bloom & Daymon, 2018). In addition, the content of jihadist online-propaganda was analysed (Ingram, 2017), including discussions on how issues are framed in order to create a feeling of identification within the audience as well as motivate action (Kirby, 2007; Winter, 2015). A variety of studies have furthermore focused on the receiving audience of this propaganda output (Aly, 2016), including how online content inspired direct action (Gendron, 2017) and more abstract notions of how virtual identity construction takes place (Schlegel, 2017).
Mere exposure, however, is not sufficient to explain online-radicalisation processes and to understand how and why individuals climb Moghaddam’s (2005) staircase of terrorism describing different stages of radicalisation as floors individuals “move up” to. The susceptibility as well as the actual radicalisation dynamics are influenced by a multitude of push, pull and personal factors (Vergani, Iqbal, Ilbahar, & Barton, 2018). The term push factors is used to describe circumstances driving an individual away from society, such as the experience of discrimination, poverty or isolation (Gill, Horgan, & Deckert, 2014). Pull factors draw an individual towards joining a terrorist organisation, such as an increased social status, fame or experiencing “adventures” (Ranstorp, 2016). For instance, Venhaus (2010) describes pull factors for joining a terrorist organisation in relation to seeking identity, seeking status, seeking thrill or seeking revenge. Membership in a terrorist organisation is understood as a vehicle to fulfil individual psychological longings rather than the product of accepting a violent ideology. In accordance with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), a strong feeling of belonging and identification with a potentially threatened ingroup may also motivate violent action (Lemieux, 2006). Personal factors include direct experiences such as imprisonment or specific triggers. As one member of the Dutch Hofstadgroupp claimed, witnessing a woman resembling his mother being mistreated contributed significantly to his radicalization (Schuurmann & Horgan, 2016).

Other personal factors related to susceptibility to or justification of terrorist violence are differences in personality measured, for instance, by social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism (Lemieux & Asal, 2010) or, in the case of lone wolves, by a disconnected-disordered or caring-compelled typology (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014). In addition, emotional vulnerability (Horgan, 2008), direct personal victimisation (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008), the presence of unusually strong reciprocity (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2011), how risky an individual perceives taking action (Kearns, Asal, Walsh, Federico, & Lemieux, 2018) or a previous conversion (Kleinmann, 2012) can contribute susceptibility to radicalization.

However, while a motive is certainly necessary, individuals also need the opportunities and means to act upon this motive. Part of an individual’s decision to take action is self-belief. One can have motive and opportunity, but without the cognitive means, that is the belief that one is capable of successfully taking a certain action, it is unlikely that one will take any action at all. For instance, one can have the wish to be a famous singer, but without confidence that one is actually able to sing well, one is unlikely to even attempt fulfilling this goal. Similarly, it is not enough to wish to take revenge or to wish to be hero, actually attempting to take violent action must at least partially be based on the belief one is capable of successfully exercising the task. Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy could help understand how individuals attain the necessary confidence in their own abilities to carry out violent terrorist action.

**Bringing agency into the limelight: Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy**

There are multiple practical and theoretical possibilities to further investigate internal changes in belief and choice within individuals’ paths of violent radicalisation, ranging from neuroscience (Decety, Pape, & Workman, 2017) to theories of learning (Wilner & Dubouloz, 2010, 2011) and to social psychology. One rich body of social psychological theory potentially relevant to the study of radicalisation is the work of Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura. He brought forward multiple distinct yet linked theoretical concepts relevant for the discourse on radicalisation, including work on identificatory and imitative
processes (Bandura, 1969), the link between moral disengagement and aggression (Bandura, 1999; Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975) and on the cognitive mechanisms by which mass communication can alter beliefs and behaviour (Bandura, 2001a). In the following, a preliminary, basic exploration of the usability of one of Bandura’s main concepts, self-efficacy within the framework of his social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997), is provided.

Bandura takes an interactionist perspective on human cognition, postulating that we are simultaneously influenced by and influencing our surroundings. He rejects the dualism between the self and society or structure and agency. From a social cognitive perspective, individuals actively shape their external context by the actions they take but also through their internal states by means of reflection, self-regulation and forethought. What guides human behaviour is not reality as it is but as the individual construes it, which can differ from individual to individual (Bandura, 1997). While "the self is socially constituted, by exercising self-influence human agents operate generatively and proactively, not just reactively, to shape the character of their social systems" (Bandura, 2001b). Perceived self-efficacy is defined by Bandura as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (Bandura, 1994, p. 71). In other words, perceived self-efficacy is the belief in one’s personal agency and capability to act. If one does not believe to be able to produce desired effects with one’s action, there is very little incentive to act, which means that self-efficacy is a fundamental component of taking any type of action. Bandura shows that low self-efficacy can lead to complete avoidance of certain situations or tasks as the individual expects to fail. Therefore, self-efficacy partially determines the situations we expose ourselves to and the tasks we attempt to solve.

Humans are reflective agents engaging in forethought and evaluation to decide upon a potential path of action; we do not simply react by default in a certain way to a certain stimulus (Bandura, 1997). While related to the so-called “quest for significance” in the current discourse (Kruglanski et al., 2013, 2014), self-efficacy is more than the wish to matter and “be someone”; it is the belief in one’s capability to do so. Self-efficacy does not label objective skills, but the self-perception of one’s abilities. Research has shown the concept to be very reliable and applicable to a variety of contexts such as academic performance (Green, 2003), counselling (Lent & Maddux, 1997), creativity of employees (Ng & Lucianetti, 2016), health, athletic or career developments, and even pain tolerance (Bandura, 1997). There are different forms of self-efficacy: task-specific efficacy versus generalised efficacy (Green, 2003) or individual versus collective efficacy (Bandura, 2001b). While collective self-efficacy beliefs are likely to be highly relevant in the context of (group-) radicalisation processes, it is beyond the scope of this work to include an analysis of the different collective cognitive processes associated with the creation of group-level efficacy. Instead, the focus is placed on individuals as the level of analysis.

Bandura (1994) postulates four main sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion and somatic/emotional states. For this discussion, mastery experiences, that is knowledge of past performance accomplishments, are less relevant as a potential homegrown terrorist cannot usually “practice” being a terrorist. As the focus is placed on violent radicalisation, “practice” would have to mean perpetrating a violent, terrorist offence. Following the hypothesis that increased self-efficacy is essential for taking violent action, this could only occur if the level of self-efficacy were already...
high enough. The judgement of one’s capabilities to fulfil the role of a perpetrator of terrorist violence can therefore not be judged by relying on past experiences of performing similar roles and mastery experiences are, for this specific discussion, excluded. While somatic and emotional states have been shown to be relevant to radicalisation research, Bandura understands these as *hinder*ing conditions for personal agency as an individual will interpret their stress reactions as vulnerability and as de-motivating for action. Radicalisation research so far has postulated, however, that arousing emotions can *facilitate* violent radicalisation and certain propaganda frames are specifically aimed at doing so. For instance, Winter (2015) partially relates his six themes of ISIS propaganda to the emotional response they cause in the consumers of propaganda. While Winter views, for instance, presenting victimhood as a motivational factor and incentive to act for consumers of ISIS propaganda, an application of Bandura’s theory would lead one to judge the negative emotions of being associated with a victim situation as *hinder*ing potential action. It is possible that within the context of taking violent action, negative emotional states may be facilitating not hindering conditions as Bandura’s theory postulates or that only in certain circumstances can negative emotion be utilised in propaganda. It is encouraged to resolve this apparent paradox between Bandura’s findings and the current discourse on motivational emotions in radicalisation processes in future psychological research. Nevertheless, for the present analysis, the focus lies on an exploration of the interlinking role of social persuasion and modelling influences in facilitating perceived self-efficacy of ISIS-affiliated homegrown extremists.

**Social persuasion**

Bandura rejects the functionalist perspective – that we are solely determined by rewards and punishments – and postulates that we are also influenced by our own internal standards, anticipated results of actions and other cognitive mechanisms such as evaluation of the past. Human self-motivation is driven by both discrepancy production and discrepancy reduction with regard to the ideal, anticipated self we seek to reach (Bandura, 1997). This means we both seek to increase what we perceive as positive as well as seeking to decrease the negative habits we have in order to come closer to what we perceive as ideal. We are motivated by who we think we can be as much as by who we do not wish to be. Our perception of ourselves and who we should be, as well as our perceived self-efficacy, is partially based on our recollection of past events and how well we “performed” in the past (Bandura, 1997).

This perception, however, is modifiable. We all know cases of someone evaluating events in their lives differently when the time has passed than when they evaluated them initially. Our standards of evaluation change over time. They can also be influenced externally and not only by our own reflection and re-evaluation. When external forces seek to influence our evaluation of past experiences and therefore our belief in our own capabilities, one may speak of social persuasion (Bandura, 1997). An external actor can partially influence the beliefs we hold about ourselves by communicating a certain perspective to us. For example, opinions of those with diagnostic competency or perceived authority, such as teachers, are able to successfully alter the perception we hold of our academic performances and, as Bandura (1997) shows, even influence performance directly. Students of maths, for example, exhibited not only greater confidence in their skills but also performed better after receiving individual encouragement from their
teachers (Bandura, 1997). If someone with diagnostic competency believes in us, we are more likely to believe in ourselves, more likely to take action, and even perform better as a consequence. What we believe we can or cannot do also influences the situations we expose ourselves to, the actions we consider to take and the decision about what action we do take eventually. This concept also holds true for evaluating failures. External actors with diagnostic competency can help us re-evaluate past failures by attributing our failure to external conditions rather than personal ability. In this way, even failures can be used to increase an individual’s self-efficacy by external means (Bandura, 1997).

Paralleling attribution theory (Kelley, 1967), social persuasion is concerned with retrospective judgements of the causes of one’s performance but it is externally driven and not rooted in our own cognition. Radicalisation is an internal cognitive process, but can be heavily influenced by external forces, in both the bottom-up and top-down manner (Baaken & Schlegel, 2017). Those with diagnostic competency – from the perspective of the potential recruit-, such as preachers, recruiters or other authority figures, may be able to transform the evaluation of past events and the recruit’s perception of his or her ability. They may persuade individuals that their failures were not caused by personal incompetency, but by detrimental external conditions. “Repeated failures arouse anxiety when ascribed to personal incapability, but the same painful experiences leave people unperturbed if ascribed to situational factors” (Bandura, 1997, p. 141). Social persuasion by charismatic preachers (Gendron, 2016) and other authority figures can help transform the evaluative standards potential recruits use to judge past performances. A previous non-efficacy is put into context by the jihadist narrative; postulating that not incompetence, but injustice and unfair treatment prevented the individual from fulfilling their full potential. “Changes in perceived efficacy result from cognitive processing of the diagnostic information that performances convey about capability rather than the performance per se” (Bandura, 1997, p. 81) and therefore failures can be turned into successes or are at least be perceived as not hindering personal self-efficacy anymore, by shifting internal cognitive standards of evaluation. For example, experiences of marginalisation and discrimination can contribute to support for extremism and thereby increase the chances of radicalisation (Lyons-Padilla, Gelfand, Mirahmadi, Farooq, & van Egmond, 2015). British Muslims, for instance, are more often unemployed than their Christian counterparts (Murshed & Pavan, 2011), express feeling securitised by the government under the Prevent Strategy (Bonino, 2012) and report high levels of discriminatory experiences (Hargreaves, 2016) with about 80% reporting to be victims of Islamophobia (Blick, Choudhury and Weir, n.d.). Propaganda can not only use experiences of discrimination to arouse strong negative emotions in the recruits, but it can also be used to increase perceived self-efficacy if authority figures can attribute perceived failures of the recruit, such as being unemployed, to external factors, such as discrimination, rather than personal inability. The recruit’s perception changes and encourages the belief that he or she has the ability to “be someone”. Failures usually discourage taking action, unless they are cognitively re-evaluated to not be an adequate representation of ability and therefore of future performance (Bandura, 1997). By altering beliefs about past failures, social persuasion helps potential recruits regain their perceived self-efficacy and therefore the belief in their own agency. Not only can someone change the detrimental conditions, they can.
Social persuasion does not only influence retrospective judgement of past failures as caused by external circumstances, but it also influences future decision-making. For tasks we have not attempted before, we cannot rely on previous experiences to judge the likelihood of success. While individuals will likely seek to remember the outcome of related tasks in the past, uncertainty about one’s abilities can be a hindering condition to taking action. Here too social persuasion by external authority figures can increase perceived self-efficacy and motivate an individual to take action despite uncertainty (Bandura, 1997). Attributing diagnostic competency to the authority figure involves the perception that they are capable of judging capabilities, appropriate courses of behaviour as well as outcomes more accurately than the individual him- or herself. In times of direct interaction between recruiters and potential terrorists through social media and especially by use of instant messenger applications (Baaken & Schlegel, 2017), personal encouragement to take action has become more powerful. So-called remote-controlled perpetrators (Tierney, n.d.) do not only receive instructions but are in contact with and receive encouragement from perceived authority figures prior to the immediate act of violence. The perpetrator of the 2016 train attack in Würzburg, Germany, for instance, had been in direct contact with ISIS “officials” prior and even during the attack, receiving encouragement and instructions (Schlegel, 2018). This is only possible because the recruit believes in the diagnostic competency of the “official” he or she is communicating with and partially basing his or her perception of self-efficacy regarding the perpetration of violence on their judgement. Horgan (2008) notes that “a sense of approval from a significant other person can also catalyze socialization into more extreme behavior” (pp. 88–89) and that these authority figures can be a source of legitimacy for the justification of violent action. Given their diagnostic competency, the potential recruit comes to believe that these authority figures are capable of judging the appropriate course of action, the justification for this action and the individual’s capabilities more accurately than he or she is able to. Generally speaking, perceived agentic empowerment through propaganda and the possibility of individual social persuasion through direct communication can facilitate a pathway towards violent extremism by increasing perceived self-efficacy in an individual.

Social persuasion cannot change cognitive standards or the anticipation of outcomes directly but can influence an individual’s perception and belief about the causes of his or her performance outcome and thereby indirectly cause an internal shift in the retrospective judgement of the performance (Bandura, 1997). We all contain pre-existing self-knowledge structures determining how we organise and interpret information, what we retrieve from memory, what we pay attention to in the reconstruction of experiences, etc. But social persuasion can play a part in altering our perception of a specific event or set of events and thereby influence future behaviour and outcomes (Bandura, 1997). If we believe the persuader to have diagnostic competency, we are likely to incorporate their perception into our own, a process paralleling “frame alignment” (Benford & Snow, 2000). Self-belief and agency are internally produced but can be modified externally. If the belief that we failed due to incompetence is re-framed into a belief that external conditions, not our abilities caused us to fail, our perceived self-efficacy increases (Bandura, 1997). We believe that we are capable, i.e., we believe in our own agency. This could be one of the factors driving an individual to act upon the radical ideology instead of remaining a non-violent extremist.
To cause a sustainable change, however, it is not enough to alter short-term perceptions. Social persuasion by means of propaganda must seek to alter retention processes. How we abstract and model events cognitively to deduce rules, behaviour and self-efficacy beliefs is deeply ingrained and not easily changed, especially from the outside. To increase the impact of propaganda and other recruitment efforts and to increase the chances of altering retention processes to inspire lasting change in cognitive evaluation, terrorist groups do not solely rely on social persuasion and the diagnostic competency of “experts”, but also on modelling influences of peers.

**Vicarious experiences/modelling influences**

Social persuasion by authorities can be powerful, but seeing that a peer, someone similar to us, is able to exercise what the authority figures preach, has a profound effect too. We do not only learn and adjust our behaviour in accordance with authority, we learn from observing our peers. Modelling influences or vicarious experiences describe what happens when we witness someone else’s performance and take them as a model for ourselves (Bandura, 1997). If we witness our brother being praised for good behaviour, we are more likely to show similar behaviour as we anticipate the same reward. Watching a peer act and witnessing a certain outcome, as a result, helps us anticipate and judge our own actions and their consequences. Paralleling social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), one could understand vicarious experiences as social identification. We identify a peer as part of our ingroup, exaggerate the similarities we share with this group and, as a consequence, identify ourselves as highly similar to the observed model. Vicarious experience is not behavioural mimicry; all internal evaluation processes, moral standards, etc., are still present in us and we self-reflect what we see and how it applies to us. However, positive social comparison with an ingroup can increase our perceived self-efficacy and increase the likelihood that we exercise our own agency in a similar manner (Bandura, 1997). To be sure, “altering efficacy beliefs through vicarious influence is not simply a matter of exposing people to models. Modelling operates through a complex set of interrelated subfunctions (…) [including] how to mobilise attentional, representational, production, and motivational subfunctions to enhance the development of personal efficacy by vicarious means” (Bandura, 1997, p. 90). In the most basic explanation, however, vicarious experiences can increase or decrease perceived self-efficacy and thereby influence the behaviour an individual exhibits.

Again related to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), one factor that determines how successful vicarious experiences are in influencing our beliefs and, ultimately, our behaviour, is a similarity to the model we observe. The more alike we are to the model we see, the more likely we are to believe that we too are capable of the model’s action and fulfilling the role they fulfil (Bandura, 1997). This is likely to be relevant in the context of radicalisation. Vicarious experiences are more important when we lack knowledge of our true capabilities (Bandura, 1997). One cannot know how well one could exercise the role of a jihadi by evaluating his or her past experiences; that is, homegrown terrorists radicalised online usually did not “practice” to be a terrorist. Having incomplete or no information about our capabilities increases the importance of vicarious experiences in judging our ability and ultimately forming our perceived self-efficacy. Seeing, reading or hearing about a peer successfully fulfilling this role increases our confidence in our own
abilities to fulfil the same type of role. Comparison with a model enables us to judge more adequately how likely a successful outcome is for ourselves and therefore influences our perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). If we view the comparison positively, we are more likely to take comparable action to the model we observed.

Terrorist organisations such as ISIS have understood that it is useful to not only portray authority figures in radicalisation, but those who are considered part of the recruit’s ingroup of peers. ISIS aspired to have a global, multicultural appeal and recruit “home-grown” terrorists in the West for attacks. It has even sought to attract foreigners to travel to its territory. As an organisation seeking to recruit globally, it has to present many different models to cover potential similarities to as many recruits as possible. One way ISIS has done this is to include foreign fighters in its propaganda efforts. While the explanations of motives foreign fighters had to join ISIS are manifold (Benmelech & Klor, 2018; Borum & Fein, 2017), social media activity has been named as a prominent facilitator for recruitment (Klausen, 2015; Weimann, 2016). Paralleling Bourdieu’s habitus concept (Bourdieu, 1994), Bandura’s conceptualisation of modelling postulates that we are more likely to be influenced by someone, who speaks our language, behaves like we do and looks like us, than we are by a model with less similarities. Therefore, ISIS foreign language channels and Twitter accounts run by foreigners are a powerful example of using modelling influences to increase the belief in self-efficacy by the potential recruit. Examples of foreign recruiters for ISIS on Twitter include Australian Neil Prakash, whose tweets included calls to contact him for help to move to ISIS-controlled territory, or British-born recruiter Sally Jones, who was allegedly in charge of training female European recruits (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.). A study by the Brookings Institute found that almost one in five out of the approximately 20 000 ISIS-related Twitter accounts studied had selected English as their primary language, testifying to the global appeal of the group and the importance of communicating messages in familiar terms to potential foreign recruits (Berger & Morgan, 2015; see also Bodine-Baron, Helmus, Magnuson, & Winkelmann, 2016 for a discussion on ISIS Twitter support networks). The similarity of the messenger to the audience was played out by ISIS in various ways, including Twitter accounts and publications in different languages tailored to specific audiences. For instance, the use of death-related imagery different substantially between English and Arabic publications, including that the English publications showed a far more diverse group of deceased (Winkler, ElDamanhoury, Dicker, & Lemieux, 2018). This suggests a differentiated messaging strategy based on model similarities. The group increased how relatable the content was to the foreign audience by the similarity of models displayed and thereby increased identification with the models shown in the propaganda.

Even if recruit and model do not come from the same background, but share other defining features such as being a “digital native” (Prensky, 2001), modelling experiences may be more powerful than in cases where no such features are shared. This is partially due to the similarity in framing or verbal expressions, which resonate well with those of a similar social disposition. As modelling can be visual and/or verbal, the role of language and mode of expression should not be underestimated in assessing similarity and therefore judging the impact of a model on a given individual. This might be especially relevant in the online context. Digital natives (Prensky, 2001) employ communication rules and styles in the virtual sphere that differ from “digital immigrants” and are able to relate to each other through social media and chat applications. This is also a form of similarity or
even habitus-sharing (Schlegel, 2017) that enables vicarious experiences to resonate and therefore can be a factor in increasing a person’s self-efficacy beliefs. In short, if we see someone similar to us, we are more likely to believe their words and are more likely to believe we possess similar capabilities (Bandura, 1997). There is a hierarchy of models with those sharing more features such as age, gender, language with the consumer of the content being more influential than those sharing less features. Our perceived self-efficacy increases proportionally to the similarity of the model for the specific type of role exhibited by the model. Therefore, vicarious experience of terrorist violence by peers can increase the likelihood an individual will act violently.

It has been established previously that existing social networks play a large role in radicalisation processes, whether they take place online or offline (Sageman, 2008). The more people sharing the same social network radicalise and mobilise, the more follow. It is believed that it is easier to recruit from existing structures as trust and interpersonal relationships already exist and do not need to be established before the mobilisation (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). However, modelling influences on personal agency beliefs may also play a role in these processes. Not only do we trust those in our social network already, but we also perceive them as part of our ingroup and “one of us”; they are perceived as exhibiting a higher degree of similarity to us than those outside the network. If someone from our existing social network is able to exercise agency and become a terrorist, we are more likely to believe that we are able to successfully exercise similar actions. Even more so, we are motivated by the “success” of others like us to take action and act upon our newly found perceived self-efficacy. Additionally, social validation may play a role this respect (Winter & Feixas, 2019). Seeing a peer in a position, which is perceived by the social network as heroic and admirable and perceived by ourselves as achievable, increases the wish to be admired for exercising agency as well, which is another strong motivational force. Not only are we shown that we are able to do it, because others just like us have done it, it is also an action that is validated by our social environment. Cognitively, the action and social validation as a reward are linked, which makes action more likely (Bandura, 1997). In existing networks, perceived self-efficacy meets social validation and together can inspire an individual to take action. Social validation may also be a motivational factor in collective self-efficacy and it is to be encouraged to explore this type of efficacy and its cognitive foundations in relation to radicalisation in the future in order to complement existing literature on social networks and socialisation in groups (Sageman, 2004).

**Cautions and limitations**

This work has limitations similar to many other works in terrorism studies, especially regarding the ever-present lack of empirical data in the field as a whole. While the theoretical application of Bandura’s concept of perceived self-efficacy to radicalisation has proven fruitful, this does not automatically point to self-efficacy as a necessary condition for violent radicalisation processes. Although self-efficacy scales and tests exist (Bandura, 2006; Panc, Mihalcea, & Panc, 2012), it retains an element of subjectivity. Especially problematic in terrorism studies is that if terrorists were to be tested with self-efficacy scales, it would only be in retrospective as (the attempt of) perpetrating violence is a precondition for an individual to be considered a terrorist. The ideal case of testing an individual before
radicalisation, during and after is impossible to achieve for researchers. Unfortunately, it is difficult to trace the evolution of one’s own perceived self-efficacy back in time since one’s self-perception is necessarily altered in the process of becoming radicalised. This means that even if convicted terrorists would be willing to collaborate with researchers in tracing this specific feature in their biography, the results are likely to be heavily influenced by their present perception of themselves. Additionally, individuals may not be aware of the factors driving their own radicalisation and could not testify to their presence or absence. Radicalisation is a phenomenon influenced by a multitude of different factors and it is possible that even with an individual’s ability to recall all the factors influencing their radicalisation process, researchers might be unable to disentangle the often interrelated factors and judge their individual importance. The relative importance of each factor also varies on a case-by-case basis and radicalisation must be viewed as an individual process differing from one person to the next. Furthermore, the concept of radicalisation is contested even among researchers and so is the distinction between cognitive and violent radicalisation. It is difficult to assess the role of self-efficacy in progressing from cognitive to violent radicalisation when lacking conceptual clarity of the basic concepts.

These limitations apply to terrorism studies and especially the study of radicalisation processes as a whole. While caution should be exercised in using contested terminology and theoretical applications, these limitations should not prevent researchers from seeking to further our understanding of cognitive factors of radicalisation even if they might currently be difficult to prove. The concept of self-efficacy as Bandura describes it has been proven to be very reliable in experimental settings testing many types of human behaviour, including behavioural change observed in individuals (Bandura & Adams, 1977). It has been researched and its effects have been shown in both children and adults, in both leisure and professional settings and on an individual as well as a group level of analysis (Bandura, 1997). This is a strong indicator for the role of self-efficacy in making decisions in a large number of cases and therefore serves as an indication that it might be relevant in many cases of violent radicalisation as well. Its wide applicability is a strong indication that self-efficacy influences the processes of violent radicalisation and furthers a holistic understanding of the phenomenon, although more research is needed to further support this suggestion.

Conclusion

This article is a first exploratory attempt to relate Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy and the individual cognitive mechanisms of enhancing it to the current academic discourse on the processes of radicalisation. While there are many models and theories seeking to shed light on both cognitive and violent radicalisation processes and both external and internal factors pushing or pulling an individual towards violence, research on the question of why certain individuals resort to violence while others are radicalised but do not act out their beliefs has not yet been examined by utilising Bandura’s rich theoretical framework of human behaviour. Bandura’s concept of perceived self-efficacy could provide a more holistic understanding of why certain individuals climb up Moghaddam’s (2005) staircase and others, in similar circumstances, do not. Online-propaganda is partially aimed at increasing the perceived self-efficacy of its consumers through social persuasion as well as vicarious or modelling experiences. Social persuasion by perceived authority figures.
such as preachers and other movement leaders can lead individuals to re-evaluate past failures as caused by external conditions rather than individual ability and thereby increase perceived self-efficacy. It can also increase confidence in new tasks presented by the authority figure as suitable for the consumer of propaganda and lead the individual to believe that he or she will succeed in exercising the task or behaviour indicated by the authority. Through peers exhibiting a high degree of similarity to the person in question, individuals can become more self-confident in their ability to fulfil a similar role. The higher the degree of similarity, the more likely that one bases their perceived self-efficacy for a given task on a model one has observed. Terrorist groups use, for instance, foreign fighters in their online-propaganda efforts to increase self-efficacy beliefs in other foreigners to join the group. Perceived self-efficacy partially determines both the situations one exposes oneself to and the tasks one attempts to master. Those with low self-efficacy tend to avoid situations they believe they are unable to succeed in. This could partially explain why some have the confidence to “move up the staircase” and expose themselves to new challenges while others do not. Once self-efficacy is increased, action becomes more likely. Both social persuasion and vicarious experiences shown in online-propaganda are aimed at doing just that: increasing the viewer’s belief in his or her own agency and inspiring violent action.

Behaviour always has multiple interrelated sources and Bandura himself criticises generalised notions of self-efficacy as a moncausal explanation for all behaviour exhibited by an individual. This article does not suggest that a range of other factors explored in the literature are unrelated to violent radicalisation, in fact, they are very important as our social environment, our experiences and our ideological worldview heavily influence our cognitive processes, perceptions and motivations. It also does not seek to suggest that self-efficacy is a sufficient or even a necessary factor in all cases of radicalisation. Rather, it seeks to complement existing literature by drawing attention to the issue of personal agency and self-efficacy in radicalisation processes through a Weberian ideal type analysis in order to facilitate a more holistic understanding of the issue at hand. Self-efficacy and agentic perspectives can offer a better understanding on how the consumption of propaganda and frames that, for whatever reason, resonate within an individual, translate into violent action and offers a potential explanation for why only a few out of a group of individuals exposed to similar messages or social circumstances.

More research is needed not only on the role of self-efficacy and agency in general play in violent radicalisation processes but also on the abundance of other applicable concepts Bandura’s theory offers the study of radicalisation. His theory of mass communication and “electronic acculturation” (Bandura, 2001a) may support a more holistic understanding of online-radicalisation. His more detailed description of behavioural production processes including why we pay attention to certain things and not others and how we transform our experiences into cognitive representations to be used as mental patterns to evaluate our performances may also play a role in the processes of radicalisation. If self-efficacy and agentic perspectives, in general, prove to be as relevant as this exploration suggests, implications for counter-radicalisation and deradicalisation efforts or risk assessment would logically follow. Low or high self-efficacy may be one of the factors determining how likely it is that a certain individual takes violent action and therefore be relevant to risk assessment tools. It also should be examined whether different paces of radicalisation may partially be explained by
existing self-efficacy beliefs. This could, for instance, help explain why some individuals with experiences in crime or violence sometimes radicalise faster than those without as they already possess perceived self-efficacy related to the roles and tasks of a terrorist. Furthermore, if strengthening self-efficacy inspires action, it might be possible for counter- and de-radicalisation practitioners to redirect perceived self-efficacy in their clients towards a more positive, non-violent behaviour. It is therefore strongly encouraged to deepen our understanding of the role of self-efficacy in radicalisation processes in the future.

Disclosure statement

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