Geoff Dean. *Neurocognitive Risk Assessment for the Early Detection of Violent Extremists*

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Reviewed by Leiya Lemkey and Dan Wilcox

In *Neurocognitive Risk Assessment for the Early Detection of Violent Extremists,* Geoff Dean provides an excellent overview of the challenges that professionals face when assessing extremists and those who commit terrorist offences. The author identifies varying problems and complexities within this field, including a lack of agreement about the definition of terrorism. The book begins by examining the inadequacy of conventional risk assessment tools and moves on to specialised instruments like the VERA (Violent Extremist Risk Assessment), a 28-item risk assessment checklist consisting of both static and dynamic factors. The RAT (Risk Assessment Toolbox) is also reviewed; a tool designed to evaluate extremist behaviours, from right- and left-wing militants to 'school shooters'. The author considers the challenge of 'false positives' in employing these tools e.g. distinguishing between those with an intention to engage in terrorist acts and those who score high but do not engage in violence.

This book explores indicators of risk, with the author's model incorporating careful consideration of neurocognitive processes associated with violent extremism. Geoff Dean explains that perceptions provide a gateway to the development of violent ideation. He writes that neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to change as a result of experience, gives rise to an interplay between cognitive processes and brain-based neuro-mechanisms (p. 35). He notes that repeated reinforcement of identification with extremist perceptions promotes the development of firmly held beliefs about the acceptability of violent and extremist views. He explains that this results in the establishment of a radicalised mind-set. At this stage, the individual is primed for violent action and shielded by rationalisations and justifications for extreme behaviours. The author notes the cyclical nature to this process, indicating that disillusionment may follow and affect the perpetrator's mind-set. However, he does not equate this to de-radicalisation. Rather, it is described as a spiralling process that may abate and re-emerge (p. 43).

Dean emphasizes that risk assessment is particularly challenging when posing the question 'how do you assess someone who is normal', but through the above process, has become radicalised? He dismisses the notion that extremists suffer from mental illness and holding that mentally unstable people do not 'make good terrorists' as they lack discipline, self-control and mental stamina – elements that are commonly found in extremists (p. 30). He asserts that violent extremism is a product of a 'normal brain' that has become neurologically wired into dysfunctional patterns of thinking that principally relate to attitudes acquired over time. He thereby focuses on attitude-based markers that distinguish violent extremists from typical anti-social offenders and explores this comprehensively within his model.

Dean examines the construct of neuro-cognition, described as a multi-layered mapping that reflects a dynamic interplay between brain-based neuro-firing patterns in the pre-frontal cortex and the mind-based cognitive pathways of consciousness. He explores the way this process influences the selective assimilation of knowledge, a personalised sense of understanding and utilization of information gathered at the 'cognitive mind' level. Within this, he asserts that the brain's architecture can shift in negative or positive directions in response to intrinsic or extrinsic influences. He explains that this feature of neuroplasticity is a key contributory element in adopting an extreme perspective, resulting from the establishment of fixed brain-based neuro-firing patterns that promote radicalised thoughts and behaviours. He notes that these cognitive pathways can be strengthened or weakened and discusses 'mirror neurons' that fire when someone sees/hears another person performing an action that resonates with their belief set, as well as when they engage in such an action. Here, the influence of exposure to terror-related videos and emotionally charged radical oratory serve as

prime examples. He details the 'firing and wiring' phenomenon, noting that, repetition, affective arousal and attentional focus serve as mediating factors in the process of reinforcing neuro-connections and pathways (p. 35).

The author makes good use of diagrams to explain various models, with a particular focus on RAT, which is used for the early detection of individuals who have the potential to engage in violent acts. The RAT test battery includes the RAVE (Risk Assessment for Violent Extremism) as well as a Structured Professional Judgement tool designed to help the professional explore dynamic and static factors, reflecting perceptions and beliefs within the assessment process. He points out that violent extremists read the same literature as academics; therefore, some aspects of the RAT have not been published.

The volume concludes with case studies wherein professionals analyse risk-based case scenarios. The author notes that accurate identification of persons of interest was worryingly low. Based on this, he questions whether trained professionals without more effective assessment tools can make a valid contribution to risk management of violent extremists.

This book focuses its attention on the behaviour of violent extremists though, in the reviewers' opinion, it also offers important clinical insights with regard to the wisdom of labelling individuals who engage in problematic behaviours as simply mentally unstable or disturbed. This volume is highly recommended to those involved in research or clinical practice where extreme behaviours or beliefs are recurring issues of concern.

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