The framing of radicalisation in the Belgian societal debate: A contagious threat or youthful naivety?

Marie Figoureux and Baldwin Van Gorp

Institute for Media Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium

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Abstract

Following the terrorist attacks of November 13, 2015 in Paris and March 22, 2016 in Brussels, radicalisation has become the topic of lively debate in Belgium. However, little research has been done on the different perspectives which people use to communicate about radicalisation in Belgium. Therefore, an inductive framing analysis of 2,271 excerpts, taken from various newspaper articles, policy documents and social media, was performed to precisely reconstruct all the frames and counter-frames that are used to define the issue. The results were validated through seven interviews and two workshops with a variety of stakeholders (imams, youth workers, academics, journalists). This resulted in the reconstruction of four problematising frames and eight deproblematising counter-frames. In addition to presenting and illustrating these frames, this paper discusses how the framing analysis can help gain insight into the social construction of radicalisation in the wake of the 2015 and 2016 terrorist attacks.

Keywords: radicalisation, framing, inductive analysis, social constructivism, extremism

Introduction

Following 9/11 and the “War on terror”, Muslim representation in the Western media shifted towards a security perspective (Poole 2011), framing Muslims more often as terrorists (Kanji 2018). This paper contributes to this discussion in two ways: on the one hand by focusing on the discursive construction of ‘radicalisation’ by providing insight into the framing of radicalisation - a possible pre-phase to terrorism - while providing alternative interpretations of the term. On the other hand this paper hones in on the Belgian context, specifically the 2016 terrorist attacks and the link established between the Brussels municipality of Molenbeek and the Paris attacks of 2015.

The term radicalisation originally gained usage within European police and intelligence circles shortly after the 9/11 attacks, simply meaning ‘anger’ (Coolsaet 2016, 3). To be radical means, “to be extreme relative to something that is defined or accepted as normative, traditional, or valued as the status quo” (Mandel 2009, 105). In general, radicalisation is understood as a process by which an individual or group comes to adopt increasingly more extreme political, social or religious ideals and aspirations that reject or undermine the status quo (Wilner and Dubouloz 2010). Starting in 2004–2005, following the attacks in Madrid and London by home-grown terrorists, the term suddenly gained widespread popularity; both in policy documentation (Kundnani 2012) and in the media (Hörnqvist and Flyghad 2012). However, radicalisation soon became a “catch-all concept” (Ducol 2015), used to refer to “everything that happens before the bomb goes off” (Neumann 2008, 4). Over the years, the meaning of the term narrowed down to “a new lens through which to view Muslim minorities” (Kundnani 2012, 3), and “Muslim-danger” (Fadil 2017, 9).

As Croft (2012, 2) argued, this securitisation of the other (e.g. the Muslim) deeply affects social interactions and everyday life. The surveillance of Muslims is then a valid attempt to control potential security threats (Awan, Hoskins, and O’Loughlin 2011). Additionally,

news media treat radicalisation and Muslims as a menace to the West (Silva 2017) which, together with the politicization of religion, might lead to impoverishments of the community, evoking resentful feelings and consequently possibly prompting radicalisation (Cesari 2010, 9). Hence, the debate on radicalisation might radicalise.

The reasons for this radicalisation and possible solutions to the problems caused by it are the subject of societal debate (for an overview, see Borum 2011; Schmid 2013). Due to the lack of consensus on the definition of radicalisation, the meaning varies along with the spokesperson. Whereas academics are generally focused on exposing the determining causes for radicalisation, as well as possible prevention tools, this paper looks at the discursive construction of radicalisation (Wood and Kroger 2000). Through the collective use of language, a reality emerges out of social interaction. The first aim is thus to determine *all* prevailing frames in the current public debate in Belgium about radicalisation, while the second aim is to identify alternative ways of communication. To achieve these goals, an inductive framing analysis, based on a varied set of data consisting of news media, policy documents, online fora and social media, is performed.

Literature review

Radicalisation, extremism, terrorism?

Despite the attention radicalisation has received in the academic world, there is no consensus on what radicalisation is, as well as what the dynamics between radicalisation, (violent) extremism and terrorism are (RAN 2016). As Schmid point out: “The concept of radicalisation is by no means as solid and clear as many seem to take for granted” (2013, 5).

The vagueness of the issue is a strong argument for why it is relevant to disentangle the different viewpoints on radicalisation.

An initial distinction can be made between cognitive and violent radicalisation (Vidino 2010). The first deals with the process of adopting ideas that differ from the mainstream, whereas the second implies the additional step of using violence (Vidino 2010, 4). Other scholars also argued that socialisation on a behavioural level is necessary for a definition of radicalisation (e.g. Della Porta and LaFree 2012). More distinctions have been made between radicalisation taking place on an individual, group or societal level (McCauley and Moskaleiko 2008) and between violent and non-violent radicalisation (Bartlett and Miller 2012). Reinares and colleagues (2008) argued that radicalism in itself does not lead to violence, but can also strive for social or political change. Another ground for discussion is the role of theology, in regards to which Roy (2005) drew attention to political rather than theological radicalisation.

Different models have been developed to map the path towards radicalisation (Borum 2011; Feddes, Nickolson and Doosje 2016; Hafaz and Mullins 2015). For example, Moghaddam's (2005) 'staircase to terrorism' model indicated radicalisation as a pre-phase. Kundnani (2012, 4) claimed that "the concept of radicalisation emerged as a vehicle for policy-makers to explore the process by which a terrorist was made and to provide an analytical grounding for preventative strategies that went beyond the threat of violence or detention". Radicalisation is consequently seen as the "holy grail of counterterrorism" (Coolsaet 2016, 4). Lynch (2013) pointed out that by linking radicalisation and terrorism to Muslim youth in Europe, as seen with the rise of the Islamic State, the concepts are intertwined with ideas on multiculturalism, identity, integration and segregation. The radicalisation, extremism and terrorism debate must thus be viewed in the larger societal context.

Framing of radicalisation

Considering that there is no consensus on the relation between radicalisation, extremism and terrorism, this paper focuses on the different *framings* of radicalisation, while exploring which frames and counter-frames link radicalisation to extremism and terrorism. Framing is the dynamic process where the meanings of complex, social issues come about. There are, however, almost as many definitions of framing as researchers studying it (see for example Iyengar 2005; Scheufele 1999). A specific definition, supported by the authors, is the one from Reese (2001, 5): “Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world”. In other words, frames are steadfast perspectives or viewpoints that can be used to structure reality in a meaningful way. Depending on the definition of the problem, the offered solutions will be different (Entman 1993). As a result, and on the one hand, a frame has to be perceived as a perspective on radicalisation that defines it in a problematising manner. On the other hand, if a frame defines radicalisation as less or not at all problematic, it is referred to here as a counter-frame. In other words, viewed from a frame, radicalisation is perceived as a problem and viewed from a counter-frame it is not, or to a lesser degree, problematic.

Frames help to understand “what is going on”. Facts do not stand on their own, but gain meaning by being embedded in a narrative. Frames are mutually shared in society and therefore they feel familiar. Their persistent and stable character assures that they play an important role in communication, even more so when people are talking about social issues. However, their familiarity and constancy might be the reason that they are not recognised as ‘frames’. Therefore, a framing analysis can help to make them visible and tangible. Hence, the first research question is:

RQ1: What are the problematising frames in the social debate on radicalisation in Belgium?

Although the purpose here is to reconstruct frames that give meaning to a specific issue, they are not issue-specific frames (De Vreese 2005). Every frame is generic to a certain extent: every issue can be framed in different ways and every frame can be used to give meaning to different issues. Brugman, Burgers and Steen (2017) claimed that people need a set of conceptual metaphors to think and talk about abstractions (Brugman et al. 2017). More abstract concepts can only be conceived by means of more concrete concepts (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Metaphors summarise a complex issue and create a comprehensible narrative; the metaphors as such can be seen as ‘templates’ to help understand new social problems and proposed solutions (Lau and Schlesinger 2005). The receiver is thus already familiar with the ideas presented (Van Gorp 2007).

Radicalisation is a particularly relevant issue for the application of a framing analysis. On the one hand, a broad range of frames are needed in order to explain what radicalisation is, and, on the other hand, there is the observation that it is difficult to point out an empirical reality that corresponds to the notion of ‘radicalisation’. Different stakeholders, such as academics, police or youth workers seem to define ‘radicalisation’ differently. What some people see as radicalisation, others refute. For example, for some, the strong dedication to religion might be a sign of radicalisation, while for others this is not radicalisation, but rather an attempt to find meaning in life.

If an empirical reality is largely missing, then a concept such as radicalisation can be seen as *a social construct* that takes shape in an interactive process of constructing a shared meaning (Burr 2003). In line with Hewer and Taylor (2007), this study builds further on elements of social constructionism and social representations theory (Farr and Moscovici 1984). These social representations are then capable of influencing the behaviour of

individuals, the representations themselves a product of people's actions and communications. According to Bugden, Evensen and Stedman (2017) both framing and social representations theory state that meaning is created when an issue is connected, via media coverage for example, to pre-existing mental constructs. In this context, the framing of radicalisation plays an even bigger role. After all, every frame results in a different definition of the phenomenon, in which the causes, consequences, solutions and moral judgement can fundamentally alter (Entman 1993). Especially when there is interest in formulating a solution for radicalisation, it is necessary to disentangle the different frames of the concept.

Furthermore, framing results in a simplification of reality. According to Entman (1991, 9), the essence of framing is sizing: magnifying or shrinking elements of the depicted reality to make them more or less salient. This might create a shortcoming: the frame that simplifies the most might receive the most recognition, since it offers a somewhat black-and-white definition of reality. More complex frames are more difficult to convey. Rather, it is the combination of different perspectives that offer insight into the complexity of the phenomenon. Two framing strategies can solve this issue: the combination of different frames and the use of counter-frames. By combining different frames, one looks at the concept from different viewpoints. This sheds light on the broader complexity at work, bringing more nuances to the surface. In this study, both problematising frames and deproblematising counter-frames will be mapped. The second research question is thus:

RQ2: What are possible counter-frames in the communication on radicalisation in Belgium?

Previous research on the framing of 'Syria fighters' in Flanders and the Netherlands (Berbers et al. 2016), has reconstructed five frames. Two of them, the terrorist and victim, problematise the issue. The three others, 'martyr', 'Don Quixote' and 'adventurer',

deproblematise the concept of Syria fighters. The counter-frames also demonstrate the popular juxtaposition of “one person’s terrorist is the other person’s freedom fighter” (Hörnqvist and Flyghed 2012, 320). Previous research analysed how the frame building of Syria fighters developed in Flanders and found that the framing of new events stems from familiar frames on related events, for example the 'Arab Spring frame', where the fight against al-Assad was presented as a legitimate one (Boesman, Berbers, d’Haenens, and Van Gorp 2017). In sum, it is particularly relevant to get an idea of what the different frames circulating in the societal debate on current topics such as radicalisation are, considering the convincing literature on framing in the media and its effect on the public’s attitude and opinions (for an overview, see for example Lecheler and De Vreese 2019).

Methodology

Sample

The frames were reconstructed by performing an inductive framing analysis (see Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Van Gorp 2010). The purposive sample of analysis material was collected mainly by using GoPress Academic, a news database. The material consists firstly of news articles and reports that deal with radicalisation published in popular and quality newspapers, news-websites and magazines (such as De Standaard, De Morgen, Le Vif, Metro FR/NL, Le Soir) between January 2015 and February 2018. As such, the departure of Syria fighters and the attacks in Paris in 2015 (connected to the Brussels municipality Molenbeek) and in Brussels in 2016 are included, as well as a significant period of time before and after these events. To ensure enough diversity, the sample was supplemented by a purposive sample of TV debates, radio programmes and documentaries. Besides traditional media, policy documents as well as Internet fora and social

media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) were included in the sample. These were added to ensure the inclusion of non-dominant perspectives in the debate.

Analysis

In total, 267 publicly available texts were collected following a thematic analysis. The material was studied with an open mind and each meaningful text fragment or image related to radicalisation, offering an idea of the definition, causes, consequences, solutions or moral judgements was coded. Out of the 267 articles, 2721 excerpts were coded that contained *framing devices* (words, images, metaphors or arguments) (Gamson and Modigliani 1989) that directly or indirectly referred to radicalisation, its causes, consequences, solutions and possibly moral judgments (*reasoning devices*). One newspaper article (Struys¹ 2017a, own translations²), for instance, reported on radical detainees and the possibility that they could “contaminate” other prisoners. Some words indicated that it would be dangerous to place radical individuals with other “clean” detainees, considering it “a real risk for contamination”. According to the article, the prisoners create a real problem when they “go back into society” and possibly “affect” the population at large. The proposed solution for “eliminating this contamination danger as much as possible”, was to erect “isolated departments” for radicalised people, where they could be *deradicalised* before “safely” returning to society. All these separate text fragments were selected and coded so that they could be clustered in a subsequent phase.

The first phase continued until certain patterns became clear. For example, the word choice in the previous example indicated an interpretation of radicalisation as something contagious. Images and word choices with the same idea were then coded correspondingly.

¹ If relevant, the background of the source of the citations will be clarified.

² It applies for the rest of the paper that excerpts from the data are based on own translations of the authors.

Following the thematic analysis, the text fragments were axially coded. Based on the assigned in vivo codes and a comparison between the different coded fragments, the researchers linked the logically connected elements and formed patterns. This collection of reasoning and framing devices formed *frame packages* (Van Gorp 2007). The overarching idea that made the package into a coherent whole was the actual frame the researchers were seeking. When an excerpt was identified that was merely a repetition or variation of what was already included and described in the database, it was subsequently disregarded. The same applies to the saturation point at which a frame package was considered sufficiently substantiated. In that case, additional examples and repetitions were not further coded. This implies that sources that happened to be analysed at the beginning of the process are included in the database in a much denser and granular form than texts that were discussed later.

The reconstructed frame packages were placed into a *frame matrix* (see table 1). It shows how the different frames are related to each other. In this way, the researchers worked inductively and step-by-step towards a limited number of frame packages. The complete set of frames and counter-frames needed to cover every aspect of the issue (i.e., the criterion of being exhaustive), without the packages overlapping each other (i.e., the criterion of mutual exclusivity).

Validation

Once the frames were constructed and described in a frame matrix, an additional analysis cycle was used to sort all excerpts according to the frame typology. If an excerpt could not be placed within the typology, it pointed towards an unidentified frame or an article without a frame. Once all excerpts could be classified within the typology, the reconstructed frames were considered to be reliably coded. However, the use of frames and the exercise implemented to identify them unambiguously and reliably are grounds for discussion. This aspect may be

comforting, as it relates to the fact that a frame is only an *invitation* to look at reality in a specific way. Ultimately, however, it is necessary to sufficiently validate the frames that have been identified.

External validation is required to compensate for the researchers' backgrounds and preferences that inevitably influence their interpretations (Van Gorp 2010). To eliminate subjectivity from the researchers, seven face-to-face interviews were conducted: one with a youth worker in Brussels, a journalist from a cultural magazine, a director from a high school dealing with radicalisation, an academic in the field of international politics focusing on radicalisation, two academics in the field of philosophy who advocate opposing views in the public debate and a lecturer on polarisation and radicalisation. Additionally, two focus groups were formed with three framing scholars, one radicalisation and media scholar, the spokesman from a local mosque, a freelance journalist writing primarily for a current-affairs magazine, a journalist from a quality newspaper and two youth workers from Brussels. In these focus groups, the participants debated on the credibility of the frames, as well as to what degree these frames were perceived to be recognisable and usable. The overarching naming of the frames was also discussed.

Results

The radicalisation problem

Four problematising frames were reconstructed, as presented in Table 1. They are discussed one by one, to indicate their differences, illustrated with excerpts from the sample.

Table 1 Frame packages that define radicalisation in the Belgian societal debate

Frame	Cultural theme	Definition of radicalisation	Cause (why is it a problem?)	Consequences	Moral values involved	Possible solutions/actions	Link with extremism and terrorism	Metaphors, choice of vocabulary
1 Criminal career	From petty thief to gangster	Step-by-step one shows more criminal behavior and thus becomes more radical	Fast money or time in prison turns young thieves into the ultimate criminal	Gangsters are collecting fame and status while creating a dangerous society	People consciously choose for evil	The police and justice department have to track down potential criminals and lock them up	Radicalism grows into extremism and ultimately terrorism	Terrorist elite school, training center for jihad's, prison as university of radicalisation
2 Virus	A life-threatening, contagious disease	Radicalisation is an evil, spreading ideology	Poisonous radical ideas are transmitted to vulnerable individuals	The society panics and activates disaster plans	The battle against evil and the victory of the right	The government needs to isolate and try to cure contaminated individuals	Radicalisation without treatment leads to violence	Positive medicines, feverish behavior, antivirusprogram, deradicalisation clinic
3 Mutiny	Resistance against the authorities	Radicalisation is the sudden uproar against the authorities	Perceived discrimination and injustice lead to buildup frustrations	There is insubordination in society and a disruption of the balance	Peace is disturbed and should be restored	The priority is to restore political stability: address frustrations or suppress the uproar	Some insurgents take up the arms	Intifada, distrust the government, resentment against the white elite
4 Clash of civilizations	Cultural and religious identity as source of conflict	Continuous challenges by 'the other' leads to aggressive behavior	Two macho cultures clash and feed the anger in each other	Society polarizes and segregates, everyone is forced to choose sides	The incompatibility of two dominant elements	One of the two cultures needs to win to restore peace and stability	A minority takes up arms to win the battle	Kulturkampf, clash of civilisations, superiority, being repressed in my own city

The first problematising frame is *A criminal career*. This refers to the process where a person starts with petty theft but turns into a real gangster. *A criminal career*, unlike the other frames, focuses on the individual aspect in the radicalisation process. People “enter prison as a drugs dealer or car thief and leave as terrorists” (Hussey [historian] in Arijns 2017). The “young people who are tired of their miserable lives as young delinquents get excited by the prospect of adventure and violence” (de Kerchove [European Coordinator for Counter-terrorism] in “Invloedrijke Belg” 2017). This leads to the fact that “in a short period of time, young crooks turn into blinded murdering machines” (Vranckx 2017). Faith or ideology are “added later to legitimise the acts” (Van San [researcher] in Pardoën 2017). Viewed from this frame, since radicalisation is a “criminal phenomenon, we need to battle it through the means of democracy and state of law” (Van Leeuw [federal attorney] in Mulders 2016).

The second, metaphorical frame is labelled *Virus*. A virus stands for a life-threatening, contagious disease that affects the body and needs to be treated. Like the first frame, *Virus* considers radicalisation to be a linear process. The frame can easily be recognised by words or metaphors that refer to a disease, such as “curing those ideas” (Verberckmoes 2017), “symptoms of radicalisation” (Demeurisse 2018) or “a cancer that is difficult to treat” (Jambon [former Belgian Minister of Internal Affairs] in Belga 2016). The disease in this case is the collection of “contagious, poisonous ideas” (Damen [lawyer] in Van Gestel 2017). Society needs to “keep a finger on the pulse” (Van Quickenborne [mayor of Kortrijk] in Redactie KW 2018) and “isolate” (Van Poecke [director of Brussels prisons] in Justaert and Eeckhaut 2017) the radicalised individuals. Viewed from this frame, it is important to “fight the epidemic” (Ferguson 2017), because it is the first step towards extremism and terrorism. An “antidote” (Vranckx 2015) should “prevent relapses” (Vanhecke and Bergmans 2017).

The third frame was identified as *Mutiny*. Mutiny is defined as the resistance of someone lower in rank against someone higher in the hierarchy. Just as *Virus*, this frame takes the societal level into account. *Mutiny* looks at radicalisation as a group's sudden revolt against the authorities due to feelings of being "excluded and neglected by society" (Hussey [historian] in Arijs 2017) because "Belgium has nothing to offer them. There is discrimination, racism and no respect for a young Muslim migrant" (AlDe'emeh [researcher] in Rotthier 2017). The "lack of prospects by the bad socio-economic situation" (Idrissi [politician] in "Oproep Yamila Idrissi" 2017) makes them feel "unwelcome and as if the whole society is against them" (Antonissen 2017). Viewed from this frame, "radicalisation is a form of revenge" (Van Malderen 2017).

Clash of civilisations, finally, is a frame from the viewpoint of a bystander who is looking at society from a distance. The saying was popularised by Samuel Huntington (1993) in his discussion of the conflict between Western and non-Western civilisations. According to this frame, radicalisation is interpreted as the aggressive behaviour one displays after being challenged by 'the Other'. The presence of "an Islamic ideology that is hostile towards Western and democratic values" (Belgian State Security 2018) has turned Belgium into, according to this frame, "a repressive warfront, followed by fear and polarisation" (Ben Allal [journalist] in Vidal 2018). Now, "two groups are facing each other with drawn knives" (Benhaddou [imam] 2016), a fight of "good against evil" (De Sutter [political psychologist] 2015). In order to protect Western freedom, "Islam needs to be restricted" (Van Grieken [politician] in Brinckman 2017).

Alternative views on radicalisation

Apart from the problematising views, eight alternative counter-frames could be reconstructed, as presented in Table 2. Although twice as many counter-frames were found, they were less

present in the database. The frames led to more citations, whereas the counter-frames were found later in the coding process and were partly clarified only during the focus group and interview phase. The large number of counter-frames therefore does not mean that they dominate the debate. The counter-frames are ordered according to micro-, meso- or macro-level focus.

Table 2 Counter-frame packages that define radicalisation in the Belgian societal debate

Frame	Cultural theme	Definition of radicalisation	Cause	Consequences	Moral values involved	Possible solutions/actions	Link with extremism and terrorism	Metaphors, choice of vocabulary
1 Puberty	The phase of becoming an adult	Radicalisation is actually a phase of identity searching	A psychological phase leads to experimenting with extreme ideologies	Young people are testing boundaries and provoking on purpose	It is a part of life and a part of growing up	Society needs to stop dramatizing and see the natural process for what it is	In exceptional cases, the young people remain on the extreme path	Wandering young people, brats, sleeper, typical for their age, do not overreact
2 Meaningfulness	Giving purpose to life	Radicalisation is actually an intense experience of ideology in a rational world	The fading of religion in the West creates a need for alternatives	Someone chooses to try and live their ideology or religion to the fullest	People have a need for spirituality	People have the right to believe and society needs to accept this fact	This severe lifestyle is aimed at inner experience and not violence	A pure living of religion, trying to lead a good life, Amish, Jehovah's, vegans, all radical
3 Penance	Righting wrongs made in the past	Radicalisation is a rebirth, a way to find forgiveness	Missteps fulfill the sinner with guilt and the urge to right these wrongs	A clear black and white interpretation shows the way to living a good life	The importance of taking responsibility and acknowledging mistakes	It is up to the sinner to give the best of himself in order to obtain forgiveness	The ultimate way to be forgiven by God is to die in His name	My sins will be forgiven, one act can erase all sins, martyrdom
4 The freedom fighter	Fighting for the freedom of a country or a people	Radicalisation is a sign of courage since someone dares to stand up for the weak	The worldwide geopolitical injustice forces someone to activism	A hero rises that battles for the good cause	Always pursue the good	A strong signal of the international community to help the oppressed and weak	Terrorism is actually a battle for freedom	Shortcut to heroism, idealists, stand up for your rights

Frame	Cultural theme	Definition of radicalisation	Cause	Consequences	Moral values involved	Possible solutions/actions	Link with extremism and terrorism	Metaphors, choice of vocabulary
5 Resilience	The ability to retake the former shape after being stretched	Radicalisation is the sudden outburst of built-up tension in society and individual	The rapid, far-reaching changes pressure society and people	The society and the individual look for a new balance	The belief in the flexibility of society	Stimulating mutual rapprochement and flexibility support the search for balance	The high tensions can give a sudden outburst to violence	We need to be stretchable and resilient, one of the most flexible communities
6 An open mind	To be approachable for the unknown	Radicalisation is no longer a threat when one realizes that the evil is only in the mind	Negative thoughts and emotions feed the gap between people	Being open to the unknown vanishes fear from society	Yin and Yang	People should learn that everyone acts out of the idea of 'doing good'	Evil can also be terrorism, but that as well is part of reality	They are part of us, need to step towards them, they are always reachable
7 Diversity	Many different ideas or opinions about something	Radicalisation is actually a small part of a variety of ideological interpretations	The extreme ends demand and receive too much attention	Society confuses an ideology or religion with one particular interpretation	More attention should be given to personal interpretations	Other perspectives should dare to demand attention, people should keep an open mind	Violence occurs only very limited in the extreme interpretations	A religious conviction like any other, extreme interpretation of Islam
8 A catalyst	An element that accelerates or starts a process	Radical ideas are fundamentally different than the mainstream view on society	Challenging thoughts thrive a democracy	An in depth discussion on society challenges the current regime	The necessity of contradiction	A democracy needs to give space to radical thoughts to keep the debate alive	If there is no room for debate, violent outliers are possible	Constructively radical, plea for radicalisation, radical enlightenment

Puberty refers to the rebellious phase in life where young people provoke authority. Consequently, the *Puberty* frame defines radicalisation as (simply) a temporary stage of identity confusion and psychological searching that, with the passing of time, will fade. In terms of the individual, radical behaviour indicates “a search for identity” (Lesaffer 2018). They are at “the age of looking for a strong engagement” (Van Leeuw [federal attorney] in Mulders 2016). Moreover, this counter-frame refers to some biological factors as reasoning devices:

Radicalisation mainly takes place in the developmental phase when young people between approximately 14 to 23 years are forming their identity. Due to brain development and body changes, during this phase in life, young people are struggling to make well-thought-out choices, they make risky choices, might be emotionally unreasonable and they quickly feel as if they are being attacked. (GO! 2015)

It is then the “typical fuckyouism of adolescents, like the punks in the seventies were wearing swastikas, as a provocation” (Hussey [historian] in Arijs 2017). Therefore, seen from the *Puberty* perspective, society needs to de-dramatise and realise that radicalisation is temporary.

Meaningfulness is another counter-frame, the definition of which does not begin with “Radicalisation is...” but rather “What other people label as radicalisation, is actually...” (see Table 2). During the validation interviews, it became clear that the people who use this perspective, reject the word ‘radicalisation’, which is considered unfit to describe reality.

From the viewpoint of *Meaningfulness*, radicalisation is the intense, personal experience of an ideology in a society “where religion is something inherently problematic” (Slaats [writer], 2017), where “people feel uncomfortable when young Muslims look for their

religious roots” (Demir [professor of sociology] in Geeraert 2017). An ideology or a religion answers the question “how do I live a good and pure life?” (Deprez [comedian] 2017). It also offers “a survival kit for postmodern times” (Benzine [political scientist] in Struys 2017b). ‘Radicalisation’ should then not be seen as something threatening, but as a purpose in life. The following quote from the data further illustrates this idea:

Two years ago, I switched schools because I put on a veil. And then, in the new school, a teacher put pressure on me because I started wearing a longer jellabiya, even though I was allowed to do so. [...] I had to stay in a separate room, so the school administration could check if I was radicalized. This was ridiculous – these were people that have known me all my life! (Young girl from Molenbeek in EIP 2017)

The *Penance* counter-frame refers to the effort to make up for past mistakes by undergoing a punishment. It is an individual’s attempt to receive forgiveness from God through atonement. Considering radicalisation from this perspective, it is “a form of cleansing, saying that ‘people with the worst pasts sometimes have the most beautiful futures’” (Hamid 2017). Faults like drug use, theft or even murder are a burden of guilt for the individual, who has gained insight into the wrong of his or her deeds. A desire to be forgiven drives these people, so they adopt a very pure lifestyle in order to set things right. This clear black-and-white interpretation of religion offers an element of stability in life and directs them in which path to follow. For individuals who have slipped off the ‘right path’ before, these guidelines of religion can be a source of comfort and certainty in a world full of temptations. Following the thinking pattern of *Penance*, being devoted to religion, is pushing oneself to the extreme to receive this forgiveness.

The freedom fighter is generally juxtaposed with ‘the terrorist’. Depending on which side one is on, one is either a terrorist or a freedom fighter. In the second sense, the person is

fighting for freedom for his or her country or people. *The freedom fighter* thus takes into account the broader geopolitical context:

Through Al Jazeera, they are confronted with the war in Gaza on a daily basis. A lot of young Muslims feel more connected to suffering fellow believers than to non-Muslims in Belgium. They want to do something! (Stevens 2016)

The sister of a radicalised Syria fighter explains her brothers' departure as such: "I think he saw Muslim children dying all over the world and wanted revenge. He saw the American bombings in Syria, and he wanted revenge" (Abedi [brother of a terrorist] in De Coninck 2017). People who leave want to "help brothers and sisters in Syria" (Mazouz [mother of a jihadi] in Carpentier 2018). They were leaving to "fight against President Assad. Some left out of discontent: the West did not give enough support to the Syrian Spring" (De Kerchove [European coordinator for counterterrorism] in "Invloedrijke Belg" 2017). Fighting is encouraged and "obituaries of killed jihadi in Syria take the form of propaganda and hymns" (Alde'emeh and Stockmans 2015). A strong and coherent condemnation of the oppression of people and violation of human rights, independent of who the perpetrator is, given by the international community, could reinforce trust in the Western societies.

Resilience, situated on the meso-level, refers to a substance or object's ability to regain its former shape after being stretched or pushed. In view of this metaphor, radicalisation is the unexpected, temporary discharge of built-up energy and tensions experienced on both the social individual level. *Resilience* emphasises the fact that "this could be a ticking bomb, but it is not. It does not explode" (Renson 2017), meaning that internal tensions are being absorbed. It is a challenge for both society and the individual to overcome struggles and find a way to stimulate mutual rapprochement. Therefore "the Islamic identity needs to take shape in harmony with society, and not as a counter-reaction" (Demirkoparan [researcher] in Zuallaert 2017).

An open mind stands for a willingness to approach other people and their ideas in an unprejudiced and open manner, even when they invoke fear. This means that “terrorists are also people” (Van Dongen 2017). If they want to become a foreign fighter, “what is important is that the reason for their departure is noble” (Van Maele 2017). The challenge presented by *An open mind* is “to be able to have mutual understanding for the other person’s ideas” (Vergauwen 2017). It is “a societal challenge to reach out a hand to someone who rejects everything you stand for” (Heremans [high school director in Antwerp] in “Het gaat echt om een gestuurde operatie” 2016). Therefore, “you need to make a step in the direction of the Other” (El Bachiri [indirect victim of terrorist attacks in Brussels] 2017).

Diversity looks at radicalisation from the macro-level. Like *Meaningfulness*, this counter-frame also refutes the word “radicalisation”. As viewed from this frame, radical Islamism is one of the extremes of Islam, thus neglecting the middle of the spectrum of beliefs within Islam. According to *Diversity*, these extreme interpretations demand (and receive) a lot of attention but are not representative of the entire ideology or religion, because “someone who shouts very loudly in an otherwise quiet mass will always get attention” (Zain [musician] in Debusschere and Delputte 2017). This perspective raises the question: “Are we really going to allow the overmediatization of a phenomenon that only concerns a very small minority of young people?” (“Radicalisme violent” 2015). Society needs to realise that “it is not necessary to be afraid of a Salafist who behaves piously in a mosque the entire day and then quietly goes home. You do not need to go fishing in an ocean” (Aboutaleb [Dutch politician] in Schoofs 2017). This counter-frame makes the comparison:

Jihadi-Salafism relates to traditional Salafism just as violent white 'supremacists' like Anders Breivik relate to the classical extreme right or ultra-nationalist ideas of some political parties and anti-Muslim groups in Western European countries (Bilal 2015, 46).

The final alternative view of radicalisation was labelled *A catalyst*; an object known to accelerate or put things into motion. Radicalisation is therefore defined as the expression of fundamentally alternative ideas about society that have the potential to alter that society to its core. Viewed from this perspective, radicalisation is necessary in a dynamic democracy:

I also want to emphasise that radicalism in itself is not a societal problem. Belgium was founded by a group of radicalised lawyers from Brussels and Liège. Vegetarians, protesters and human rights activists are all civilians that have been radicalised in some way. Society needs more of those radicals. (Zuallaert and Van Humbeeck 2016)

Hence, some people are expressing a “plea for radicalisation” (Jahjah [Belgian politician] 2016) since to “re-radicalise is better than to de-radicalise” (Stevens 2016). It is the character of “a democracy to be flexible enough to cope with ideas that challenge the mainstream opinions” (Benhaddou [imam] 2016). Along with *Resilience*, *A catalyst* builds off of the basic idea that radicalisation is a positive action. *Resilience* interprets radicalisation as the result of negative pressure on society and the individual, which can lead to a positive outburst.

Discussion

This paper examines the Belgian societal debate on radicalisation from January 2015 to February 2018. It provides an overview of that debate by presenting both the frames and the counter-frames commonly used in the Belgian public discourse on the topic. Although it is not possible to quantify, the coding process showed that the four problematising frames were dominant when compared to the counter-frames, even if a higher quantity of counter-frames were found. The counter-frames emerged later in the coding process and sometimes required clarification from the focus groups and interviews, whereas the frames displayed a dominant presence in the database and offered more citations. However, considering the coding

procedure of disregarding additional repeating devices once a saturation point was reached, it is not possible to make conclusive remarks on the extent to which particular sources (e.g., popular/qualitative newspapers) applied the frames in practice. In order to be able to do so, an additional quantitative, deductive analysis of the data is needed.

Some frames include elements such as ‘sudden uprisings’ (*Mutiny*) or a ‘clash’ (*Clash of civilisations*). In the counter-frames, radicalisation is regarded as a static concept rather than a process, for example as in the act of seeking forgiveness in the *Penance* counter-frame. In *Puberty* especially, when studying the phase characterised by searching for identity and testing boundaries, it is possible to see the inner dynamics of radicalisation. During the validation phase, apart from the frames and what can be found in the dataset, every interviewee mentioned the importance of viewing radicalisation as a process. Despite this consensus among academic literature and experts, the idea of a process is not reflected in most of the societal perspectives on radicalisation. This might be a consequence of media and policy managers needing to simplify ideas and provide clear-cut answers, whereas the idea of a process and the emergence of different building blocks are more complex concepts to bring across. The framing analysis resulted in mainly metaphorical frames and counter-frames, as discussed by Brugman et al. (2017), which present the issue in a simplified form. Considering the elusiveness of the concept, the combination of frames and counter-frames is required to capture the complexity of radicalisation. The frames are necessary devices for examining the problem, while the counter-frames help in *understanding* and trying to formulate a solution.

Furthermore, looking at the literature, several similarities can be identified. The distinction made between a focus on socio-economic circumstances and identity clashes (Hörnqvist and Flyghed 2012) is reflected in the frames. *Mutiny* takes these circumstantial factors into account, however it also emphasises the subjective aspect: discussing *perceived* backlog and discrimination. *Virus* and *Clash of civilisations* are in contrast much more focused

on the aspects of ideology and identity. *Puberty* can be viewed as the social variant of what Sieckelinck et al. (2015) discussed: these authors focused attention on the pedagogical aspect and the importance of identity searching.

Additionally, there is some convergence with the frames on Syria fighters as reconstructed by Berbers and colleagues (2016), although that study did not focus on the issue of radicalisation. Ideas that are inherent to the ‘martyr’ frame (deciding to help brothers and sisters in Syria) are part of *The freedom fighter*. Considering the events leading up to the departure of the Syria fighters, and the terrorist attacks claimed by the Islamic State, the collected material reflected the prominence of *Islamic* radicalisation in the current Belgian societal debate. Just as Ruigrok and Van Atteveldt (2007) highlighted the link between Islam and terrorism in the media, the concepts of radicalisation and Islam also seemed to correspond. However, the analysis demonstrated that radicalisation involves more than just Islam, just as Islam involves more than radicalisation. For example, in Belgium, radicalised Syria fighters are occasionally compared to Eastern front fighters in the Second World War (De Wever [historian] 2017). In this comparison, the *The freedom fighter* counter-frame could be easily recognised. After all, Eastern front fighters were following their ideals, and these (mostly) young people believed that they were actually doing the right thing. The same exercise could apply for the radicalisation of the political extreme right or extreme left. The frame matrix thus suggests that there is no direct link between radicalisation and Islam.

The overview of twelve frames and counter-frames leads one to question how they are connected to each other and what underlying patterns they could share. In this case study, multiple counter-frames can be placed across one frame. There are, however, several clear, logical relationships. Some frames and counter-frames are situated at the micro-level, namely *A criminal career*, *Puberty*, *Meaningfulness*, *The freedom fighter* and *Penance*. The *Resilience* and *An open mind* counter-frames are situated at the meso-level. *Virus*, *Mutiny*, *Clash of*

civilisations, *Diversity* and *A catalyst* can be found at the macro-level. Reference to these levels and the distinctions between them can also be found in the literature on radicalisation (Feddes, Nickolson, and Doosje 2016; McCauly and Moskalenko 2008; Schmid 2013).

Diversity and *Meaningfulness* are refuting to use ‘radicalisation’. They express the idea that, when people talk about radicalisation, they are actually discussing another topic: the ambivalence of ideology or religion, or the natural need for spirituality. Both counter-frames intend to unmask the sensationalism surrounding radicalisation and explain that it actually represents something else – something *normal*. *Puberty* does not refute the idea of radicalisation, but does attempt to normalise the issue. However, these counter-frames tend to gloss over the issue too much. This reinstitutes the discussion on defining radicalisation as a *social construct*. According to these counter-frames, interpreting radicalisation as ‘an attempt to lead a good life’, ‘a normal phase in life’ or ‘a certain interpretation of ideology’, there is no need to use the term ‘radicalisation’. Radicalisation is then an alternative term for a known phenomenon, and as such it is normalised.

In addition, in light of the fact that twelve different perspectives are used to view radicalisation, the word itself loses its explanatory value. Instead of making it easier to discuss a phenomenon and creating a mutually agreed-upon definition, the concept is contested and becomes somewhat ambiguous. Some advocate the adoption of a different term and an end to the ‘container concept’ usage of radicalisation (e.g. Reinares et al. 2008 suggested the alternative: “socialization into extremism which manifests itself in terrorism”). It is, however, challenging to avoid using the term since it is widespread in the societal debate and in the media. Especially when dealing with radicalisation as a social construct, the presented overview of frames and counter-frames can clarify the entanglement of various definitions and perspectives. By using the frame matrix, it is possible to recognise frames used by the different stakeholders. Becoming aware of one’s own framing might also clarify the perspectives of

others. For instance, in *Clash of civilisations*, both groups are using the same framing methods, directed at each other. Realising this might provide more insight into ‘the Other’s’ concerns, arguments or doubts.

Not only other stakeholders, but other radicalisation theories can fit into the frame matrix as well. According to the relative deprivation theory (Gurr 1974), collective violence or terrorism occurs when people feel neglected regarding economic, social or cultural benefits they feel entitled to. This theory aligns with the *Mutiny* narrative. Social movement theory (SMT) (Klandermans and Oegema 1987), which involves protests, motivational aspects and the mobilisation of new members to join and advocate for a changing society, would fit in with the ideas encompassed in *A catalyst*. Dalgaard-Nielsen (2008) linked SMT to framing theory, arguing that both can help in understanding radicalisation by focusing on processes rather than on socio-demographic elements. According to securitising theory, an issue is securitised when it is framed as “an existential threat requiring emergency action” (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, 27), which shares aspects of the *Virus* narrative.

The debate on radicalisation might seem chaotic and overwhelming, but it did bring underlying tensions to the foreground where they can be debated openly. Moreover, the frames of radicalisation are connected to the framing of terrorism, migration, the role of religion (Islam) in society and multiculturalism, as Lynch (2013) also suggested. *Meaningfulness*, for example draws attention to the elements of dealing with religion and spirituality, while *Mutiny* aims to stress structural inequality. *Clash of civilisations* includes the debate on the compatibility of different cultures. Examining the cycle of expression of fear towards Islam reveals the consequent feeling of being unwelcome and unappreciated experienced by young Muslim people, who might then turn their back to society, which in turn invokes more fear of this closed group, further reinforcing the other elements in the cycle. The ways in which the media report on radicalisation and people discuss radicalisation might have a strong impact on

the population groups involved. Likely, the young people in Molenbeek are actually simply trying to find a way to live a good life – as *Meaningfulness* suggests. Within a frame such as *Clash of civilisations*, their feeling of identity can be deeply affected. Keeping the dialogue alive with the people who are perceived as radicalised can shed more light on the interconnection of the concepts of migration, religion and multiculturalism.

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