Professor Neil Ferguson draws on his work in Northern Ireland with former Loyalist and Republican combatants, to look at factors which occur regularly in accounts of engagement in violent extremism.

Whenever we experience a terror attack, our initial response is to think ‘how could someone do that? What would drive a person to kill others for political or ideological gain?’ Unfortunately the answers to these questions are not simple, and psychologists have struggled to derive adequate answers for decades.

The main problem lies with the dynamic and multifaceted range of factors involved in the transformation from civilian to violent extremist. Individual factors, community and societal context, and global ideological forces all have an influence. However, evidenced-based research is beginning to unearth some consistent findings and produce some useful insights.

The most common factor held prior to engagement in violent extremism is that of having a sense of being a member of a community which has been collectively victimised or unjustly treated. This condition is key to setting the contextual environment for radicalisation towards violent extremism to begin to be possible. This is clearly illustrated in the accounts of many of the former Republican paramilitaries I have interviewed. They spoke about how witnessing the brutality of the British military treated them. This condition is key to setting the contextual environment for radicalisation towards violent extremism to begin to be possible. This is clearly illustrated in the accounts of many of the former Republican paramilitaries I have interviewed. They spoke about how witnessing the brutality of the British military treated them.

Although a person may join a group whilst emotionally aroused in reaction to events around them, rather than through a radical ideological awakening, once they join a group then a number of psychological pressures push them into a deeper affiliation with the group and its ideological worldview. In Northern Ireland’s segregated society Protestants and Catholics live separate lives. In what has been described as a ‘benign form of apartheid’, this segregation in homogenous groups has a significant impact on perceptions of threat and biased attributions. However, once the individual joins extremist groups within these already segregated homogeneous partisan communities, the small group pressures are amplified. Inside these extremist cliques, the individuals are further insulated from the outside world and different opinions. Being involved in these groups creates groupthink-like conditions which foster conformity and remove barriers towards their involvement in extremist violence. Being active in these organisations also increases the sense of purpose, and feelings of empowerment, efficacy and decreased moral ambiguity. Being a member of a small secretive group also increases the sense of intimacy and brotherhood, heightening the sense of collective identity. For most combatants I have interviewed, these aspects were further magnified during imprisonment.

These experiences also provided the former combatants with a sense of purpose that sustained their activism beyond imprisonment and onto political or community work on their release.

These findings illustrate that any intervention to counter recruitment must focus on non-ideological factors and perceptions of injustice or grievances held by communities as this is the key precursor to involvement. These interventions must be able to respond to these perceptions without exacerbating them and further alienating the community. Once the individual is a member of an extremist group, the small group pressures and isolation from outside influences and discourses make it much more difficult to change the individual’s course. Thankfully, Northern Ireland has also shown us that with changes in the political context, people of violence can become peacemakers, and that the activism that fuelled their violence can also fuel their peace-building work.