CREST Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats

# Trauma, Adversity and Violent Extremism:

## Implications for Risk Assessment

**FULL REPORT**

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## FULL REPORT

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This report is related to the CREST project 'Trauma, Adversity and Violent Extremism'. This project focuses on understanding how trauma and adversity are implicated in violent extremism's causes, processes and outcomes. You can find all the outputs from this project at: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/trauma-adversity-and-violent-extremism/

*Study design, data analysis and findings were completed independently by the research team and should not be taken as representative of views held by those who fund CREST.*

**ABOUT CREST**

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# INTRODUCTION

## OVERVIEW

This report outlines the foundations for a trauma-informed approach to risk assessment and discusses the utility of adopting such an approach in the contexts of countering violent extremism (CVE) and counterterrorism (CT). It builds on a systematic review on trauma, adversity, and violent extremism that examined the prevalence of trauma in life histories of violent extremists, and the relevance of trauma for interpreting journeys into and out of extremism (Lewis et al., 2024a).

The systematic review emphasised that relationships between trauma and radicalisation are important but non-deterministic. It outlined how a nuanced understanding of trauma and its effects can help researchers and practitioners interpret how and why some individuals become, and remain engaged in, violent extremism. This perspective helps to illustrate how individualised and contextualised (mal)adaptive responses to trauma might contribute to a range of negative life outcomes including, but not limited to, violent extremism (Lewis et al., 2024a). This report explores how understanding these processes might inform risk assessment.

In what follows we set out some of the underpinning elements of a trauma-informed approach to risk assessment. The report first explores the key features of the dominant structured professional judgement (SPJ) risk assessment paradigm used in this context. Through this discussion, we examine whether and how trauma and its effects are currently captured within existing SPJ tools. Attention then moves to the core features of a more explicitly trauma-informed approach and discusses how it might help practitioners assess and interpret risk and address some of the challenges facing current SPJ approaches.

This involves setting out four features of a trauma-informed approach to risk assessment, which include:

- The gains made by understanding involvement in violent extremism as a means of *adapting* to experiences of trauma and adversity in an effort to meet basic psychosocial needs.
- The need for a *social-ecological*, contextualised interpretation of risk that recognise how trauma can become embedded in contexts which are themselves dynamic and can influence levels of risk.
- The benefits of taking a *life-course perspective* which can make visible how the impact of trauma histories unfolds over time.
- The importance of a more holistic and *dynamic* understanding of how histories of trauma and adversity shape risk.

## DEFINING TRAUMA

Trauma is often understood as having a dual meaning: it is used to refer to events that are experienced as distressing and to the effect of those events (Briere & Scott, 2015). However, different authors and disciplines take distinct approaches to determining what is and is not trauma. Our work takes a deliberately broad approach to reflect two key features of the research:

- Trauma is a subjective concept. The extent to which an event is experienced as traumatic is less about its objective severity, and more about what that event means to the individual concerned (Boals, 2018). These meanings can be specific to individuals. They are also often shaped by collective processes, including the lasting effects of historical or collective traumas that can become embedded in present-day contexts (Lewis et al.,

2024a), and systemic issues that can produce and/or exacerbate trauma (Goldsmith et al., 2014).

- Experiences of trauma can produce a broad range of observable and unobservable sub-clinical and clinical effects. In what follows, we take account of clinical diagnoses such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); sub-clinical forms of observable stress and strain (e.g., Corner & Gill, 2020); and developmental effects of early-life trauma (Windisch et al. 2022).

We therefore use the term 'trauma' to refer to a range of events and contexts that produce real or perceived 'harm to a person's safety, integrity or life, and that are negative in impact and outcome' (Fink & Galea, 2015, p. 2) for individuals and/or collectives. This definition is deliberately broad to capture different dimensions of trauma and its effects (Lewis et al., 2024a). These can be broken down as follows:

- **Acute/Chronic:** Trauma can be produced by a singular traumatic event or may be prolonged and persist across the life course. It may be informed by abuse and neglect, or the absence of emotional support.
- **Direct/Indirect:** Trauma may result from personally experiencing a specific event but can also be a vicarious effect of events experienced by others.
- **Individual/Collective:** An event may be specific to an individual (e.g., parental loss) or may be shared by a collective (e.g., conflict and war).
- **Contemporary/Historical:** Trauma can be produced by events experienced directly or indirectly during one's own life and may be transmitted across generations through different biopsychosocial mechanisms and narrative.
- **Socio-Ecological:** Trauma can be produced, and become embedded in, different levels of social ecology, and individuals can be impacted by systemic and structural, societal, familial, community, and individual forms of trauma.

## A NOTE ON THE LANGUAGE OF TRAUMA

A trauma-informed approach to risk assessment is about more than diagnosing or identifying the presence and relevance of trauma. It offers a fundamentally different way of thinking about how and why individuals come to see violent extremism as an appropriate and accessible way of addressing problems and meeting needs. In doing so, it promises a more holistic understanding of the individual at the heart of the assessment process, and a different way of interpreting the risk they might pose.

In making this argument, it is important to stress that we recognise and seek to resist the risk of securitising trauma and mental health that might result from applying the language of trauma in this field of practice. We are not suggesting that experiences of trauma are straightforward risk factors for involvement in violent extremism, and caution against any attempt to draw direct causal pathways. We are also not seeking to pathologise trauma by suggesting it is something abnormal or dangerous. Nor do we wish to pathologise the desire for political change by suggesting it is caused by mental health problems. However, there is now a growing body of work examining the need for trauma-informed perspectives in this context (e.g., Dean, 2024; Schirch et al., 2023), and our own systematic review identified several important findings that point to the potential benefits of such an approach:

- Because trauma and its effects can emerge during, and persist across, different stages of engagement in violent extremism, practitioners will benefit from being sensitive to the risk of re-traumatisation when working with individuals, regardless of whether this trauma history played a role in their journey into, and out of, violent extremism.
- Trauma has been shown to play an important role in radicalisation in some cases. Whilst this relationship is complex, highly contextualised, and non-deterministic, adaptive responses

to different forms of trauma can create the context for radicalisation. This suggests that practitioners would benefit from taking a trauma-informed perspective.

- Violent extremist ideologies and identities have the potential to perform a protective function for individuals who experience trauma during different stages of engagement. Individuals with a trauma history may come to see engaging with extremist ideas and groups as an appropriate mechanism for meeting needs that are difficult to achieve pro-socially.

The approach set out in this report sees involvement in violent extremism as a maladaptive way of trying to meet psychosocial needs in ways which are influenced by contextual factors and individualised histories of trauma and adversity. In setting out this position, we are not arguing that trauma histories mean people don't have agency and aren't making choices when they engage in harmful efforts to promote change or meet needs. Rather, we are suggesting that cognitions and behaviours associated with violent extremism are better understood, not as indicators of vulnerability, but of individuals adapting in ways that help them 'survive' in contexts and circumstances they experience as threatening (Dean, 2024). At the same time, we do not seek to excuse the harm caused through terrorism and extremism by pointing to the relevance of trauma histories. Instead, we hope that by exploring the different ways in which trauma and adversity might be relevant to understanding involvement in violent extremism, we can support the development of effective and ethical approaches to interpreting risk and intervening to prevent harm.

# RISK ASSESSMENT AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM
## The Structured Professional Judgement (SPJ) Approach

## OVERVIEW

**Key Points**

Structured professional judgement (SPJ) approaches structure the process through which practitioners apply knowledge and expertise to individual cases.

This application of professional judgement is particularly important in relation to violent extremism given the wide range of factors that have been associated with radicalisation in the literature, and the inherent subjectivity in assessing risk.

Interpreting the relevance of different factors and translating the results of SPJ assessments into risk formulations and risk management plans are two key challenges identified in the literature on countering violent extremism.

The Structured Professional Judgement (SPJ) approach is the dominant framework for assessing risk in the context of preventing and countering different forms of violence, including violent extremism (Logan et al., 2023). SPJ approaches have been described as a continuum ranging from 'leaner' to more comprehensive models (Lloyd, 2019) and are characterised by 'the use of practice guidelines to systematize the exercise of professional discretion by evaluators' (Hart & Vargen, 2023, p. 109).

Guidelines are often operationalised through risk assessment tools or frameworks that are designed to support evaluators by 'structur[ing] their judgments of risk by means of a scaffold of key indicators, often grouped into broader domains that can demonstrate a link (theoretical and/or empirical) with the violence to be prevented' (Lloyd, 2019, p. 7). Whilst these indicators typically focus on risk factors, some tools also capture protective factors (Lloyd, 2019), and practitioners using these tools commonly stress the importance of considering protective factors when assessing individuals in different intervention contexts (Hewitt et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2024b).

Several tools have been developed specifically for the CVE context, including the Extremism Risk Guidance 22+ (ERG 22+); Violent Extremism Risk Assessment Version 2-Revised (VERA-2R); and the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol-18 (TRAP-18) (Lloyd, 2019). Whilst the type and number of indicators contained within these tools varies, each framework captures 'a set of core risk factors derived from the scientific, theoretical, and professional literatures which are considered in all assessments' (Copeland & Marsden, 2020, p. 7). The tools used, and the way they are used, varies across interventions and between practitioners (Lewis et al., 2024b).

Whilst research suggests that CVE and CT practitioners are broadly supportive of SPJ approaches (Cubitt & Wolbers, 2022; Logan et al., 2023), some have avoided the use of structured tools, or have drawn more heavily on professional judgement and intuition when using them (Lewis et al., 2024b). A number of concerns relating to the use of existing SPJ tools have been identified in the literature. These relate to the inclusion or exclusion of specific risk and/or protective factors; their ability to accurately predict risk; difficulties translating the results of risk assessment into risk formulations and risk management actions; and the lack of robust validation and limited empirical support they have attracted, particularly when it comes to

predictive validity (Corner & Taylor, 2022; Hassan et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2024b).

A key challenge facing efforts to develop SPJ tools is identifying a set of indicators that can be generalised across what are highly contextualised and individualised processes of radicalisation (Cubitt & Wolbers, 2022). Research has identified over 1500 factors that have a statistical relationship to some form of radicalisation outcome (Corner & Taylor, 2022). In addition, the evidence base underpinning some of the risk assessment tools has been described as 'poor quality ... predominately composed of theoretical assertions, secondary citations of literature reviews, and media articles.' (Corner & Taylor, 2022, 3). Journeys into and out of violent extremism are shaped by complex intersections of different factors across levels of an individual's social ecology, from individual, to family, community and societal level processes (Lewis & Marsden, 2021). Identifying a common set of factors that are likely to be most relevant to interpreting risk across cases and contexts is therefore inherently challenging.

Efforts to develop a 'scaffold of key indicators' seek to prioritise those factors believed to be most pertinent. However, although it may be possible to identify factors that are prevalent across multiple cases, no factor will be universal. Evaluations of existing tools have shown that although certain risk factors may be more pronounced amongst samples of violent extremists, no factor is universally present (e.g., Elliott et al., 2023). Moreover, the presentation of different risk factors might be interpreted differently depending on the individual being assessed, and the historical, social, environmental, or temporal contexts in which they manifest: a source of risk for one individual, can be a source of resilience for another (Campelo et al., 2018).

Given these complexities, SPJ tools have the advantage of not seeking to be prescriptive. Instead, they are better understood as 'decision making aids to assist an expert evaluator' (Hart et al., 2016: 651). In the absence of a universal set of indicators, the assessor's discretion and professional judgement is crucial. Whilst this can introduce subjectivity into the process (Lewis et al., 2024a), practitioners argue that they need the space to interpret indicators mindful of the specificities of the case and context, and the different combinations of factors that might be relevant (Nguyen et al., 2024; Rousseau et al., 2024; Hewitt et al., 2022). The SPJ approach is intended to support this analysis and 'to take practitioners towards the integrated individual and away from counting disarticulated behaviours' (Logan, 2021). In the next section, we discuss whether and how trauma is reflected in existing tools and frameworks.

## SPJ AND TRAUMA

**Key Points**

Several CVE SPJ tools capture cognitions and behaviours associated with trauma.

There are limitations to how trauma is captured and assessed within existing frameworks, as the identification of trauma is rooted in certain assumptions about what is, and is not trauma, and how the effects of trauma manifest.

Some practitioners have identified trauma history as a potential risk factor for extremism and terrorist violence (Oberg et al., 2023; Logan et al., 2023). Whilst our systematic review pointed to both the prevalence and potential relevance of trauma and adversity in the life histories of violent extremists, and those at risk of engaging in violent extremism (Lewis et al., 2024a), the research indicates that these relationships are complex and contextualised rather than straightforward or linear.

In some instances, trauma can cluster and interact with other factors in ways that might contribute to an increased risk of radicalisation (e.g., Campelo et al., 2018). It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that some CVE SPJ tools capture variables related to trauma

and adversity. For example, the VERA-2R includes 'violence in family'; 'problematic upbringing and/or placed in juvenile care'; and 'post-traumatic stress disorder' (Logan et al., 2023). Similarly, illustrative risk assessments and formulations of radicalised or at-risk clients (e.g., Logan et al., 2023) suggest that trauma is one potential factor that might be considered, regardless of whether trauma is explicitly identified as a risk factor by the risk assessment tool being used.

Some advocates for trauma-informed risk assessment stress the importance of screening for trauma (SAMHSA, 2014; Bates-Maves & O'Sullivan, 2017). A range of assessment or screening tools may be used to identify experiences or symptoms of trauma as part of a broader SPJ approach to risk assessment and formulation (Bates-Maves & O'Sullivan, 2017). In some cases, practitioners can and do use trauma screening instruments in conjunction with risk assessment tools when working with violent extremists (Barracosa & March, 2023).

However, many of these tools are rooted in assumptions about what is and is not a traumatic experience and how the effects of trauma manifest, which may limit their ability to identify relevant events and effects (Sheth et al., 2023). This is in part due to the subjective way in which individuals experience potentially traumatic events. Some who experience what might appear to be an objectively distressing event may not be negatively affected, whilst others who encounter less objectively severe events may experience trauma (SAMHSA, 2014).

Trauma and its effects may also not always be evident to the practitioner, or even to the individual being assessed (SAMHSA, 2014). This is particularly the case with more subtle developmental effects of trauma that fall below the threshold of clinical diagnoses, but which can be relevant to interpreting radicalisation (Lewis & Marsden, 2021). This can include the impact of neglect and the absence of care, which is a feature of some radicalisation pathways (Rolling et al., 2022). Finally, because experiences and impacts of trauma can be informed by wider cultural contexts, there is no standardised instrument that can be used with clients from different cultural backgrounds (SAMSHA, 2014).

A further challenge is that experiences of trauma are so ubiquitous amongst the general population that its mere presence cannot be seen as a decontextualised indicator of risk (Benjet et al., 2016). This draws attention to the importance of a sensitive and contextualised understanding of an individual's trauma history in risk assessment processes. Because any relationship is likely to be indirect, and mediated or moderated by different factors (Ellis et al., 2022a), efforts to explore trauma as part of a risk assessment will rest on the evaluator understanding the individualised, contextualised and dynamic ways in which individuals respond and adapt to trauma and adversity, and the different ways this can manifest (Bates-Maves & O'Sullivan, 2017).

# TOWARDS A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH TO RISK ASSESSMENT

## OVERVIEW

**Key Points**

A trauma-informed perspective provides the foundation for a more holistic and contextualised approach to assessing risk.

SPJ tools can be used to support this type of trauma-informed assessment.

A trauma-informed perspective does not view trauma as a risk factor as traditionally understood within SPJ frameworks, and instead frames it as a contextual factor for interpreting current and potential future trajectories.

A trauma-informed approach to risk assessment involves a more holistic, contextualised approach which integrates research on trauma-informed practice with insights from the evidence relating to violent extremism. When used by skilled and knowledgeable practitioners, SPJ has the potential to support this type of contextualised analysis (Logan, 2021). However, existing tools still primarily treat trauma and its effects as potential risk factors for negative outcomes. A trauma-informed approach goes beyond seeing trauma as a risk factor and instead understands trauma as a contextual factor, an appreciation of which can help practitioners interpret current or past behaviour and provide insight into trajectories into and out of extremism. What follows describes four elements which underpin a more trauma-informed approach to risk assessment that are expanded upon in the rest of the report:

1. Embedding risk assessment in an understanding of how human beings adapt to trauma and adversity.
2. Interpreting the role trauma and adversity play from a life-course perspective that recognises how the effects of trauma unfold across different stages of life and stages of engagement in extremism.
3. Contextualising an understanding of risk in socio-ecological contexts that have the potential to evoke trauma and shape the opportunities available to adapt to adversity.
4. Developing a more dynamic understanding of risk that takes account of how risk changes and manifests differently across time and place, and in the context of different trauma histories.

## ADAPTATIONS, TRAUMA AND INTERPRETING RISK

**Key Points**

Adaptive responses to trauma enable individuals to meet core needs when they perceive themselves as being under threat.

Individuals who experience a sense of threat and stress may come to see cognitions and behaviours associated with violent extremism as appropriate mechanisms for meeting core needs when they lack pro-social alternatives.

Journeys towards violent extremism might usefully be understood as an individual's attempt to adapt to trauma and adversity and meet needs.

This invites assessors to consider the needs that sit beneath observed cognitions and behaviours that are normally considered 'risky'.

Beyond the need to recognise the relevance of exposure to trauma, it is necessary to consider how people adapt to trauma and adversity when interpreting trajectories into and out of extremism (Lewis et al., 2024a). Adaptation, understood as the ability to respond to environmental stressors in ways which mitigate their harmful effects (Del Giudice, 2014) is usually understood as being adaptive if it helps preserve someone's well-being and meet their needs, but maladaptive if it produces harm (Barrett, 2013):

> **In general, a behavio[u]ral, cognitive, or emotional process is adaptive to the extent that it better enables the person to regulate his/ her behavio[u]r, internal processes, or social interactions so as to deal successfully with his/ her environment concurrently and/ or in the future.**
>
> **(Barrett, 2013, p.71)**

Adaptations have contextual and normative dimensions. Responses to stressors are informed by the context in which they are enacted, as behaviour that may be adaptive in one setting may be harmful in another (Barrett, 2013; Dean, 2024). At the same time, a response may be adaptive in one sense whilst producing other forms of harm:

> **For example, self-injurious behaviour may provide someone with a sense of control but may also threaten their status or position within a social group. So, whilst such responses can be adaptive and purposeful (to a point, at times, in different contexts), they may create other harms, outlive their value and usefulness, or not be as adaptive as alternative responses (i.e., those that create less distress or troubling behaviour but still aid survival and fulfil core needs).**
>
> **(Dean, 2024, p. 5)**

These processes also have a normative dimension, as the extent to which a response is considered adaptive is informed by a moral assessment of the behaviour and the extent to which it conforms to pro-social norms (Del Giudice, 2014). For example, an individual may adapt to an event in ways which seek to protect him or her from harm but do so in a way that causes harm to others. This may be adaptive for them but understood as maladaptive from a legal or moral perspective.

Research is beginning to explore the idea that involvement in violent extremism can be understood as a function of maladaptive coping mechanisms (Windisch et al., 2022; Logan et al., 2022). This work illustrates the benefits of shifting attention away from 'risky' cognitions and behaviours, towards understanding the 'unmet needs' that these risk factors might reflect (Silvester, 2022, p. 342; also, Dean, 2024). For example, research examining the role of distal forms of trauma on radicalisation pathways, including Simi et al.'s (2016) risk factor model (Windisch et al., 2022; Logan et al., 2023), highlights how psychological and behavioural responses to

trauma can create contexts within which radicalisation is more likely. Research looking at other forms of trauma has similarly illustrated how maladaptive responses to trauma might contribute to radical outcomes (e.g., Canetti et al., 2013). This approach highlights how some 'risky' cognitions and behaviours that manifest in the present might be understood as normal, albeit maladaptive, mechanisms for coping with life experiences (Dean, 2024).

Foregrounding histories of trauma and adversity draws attention to the cumulative effects of trauma, and the ways in which an initially adaptive response to trauma or adversity might increase risk in the medium or long term, for example by exposing the individual to violent or harmful contexts (Koehler, 2022; Logan et al., 2022) and 'creating new threats to our survival or prevent[ing] other core needs from being fulfilled, resulting in further distress or troubling behaviour' (Dean, 2024, p. 5).

Responses to trauma can also shape the contexts in which subsequent life events are experienced by increasing the likelihood that new events or environments are perceived as threatening (Del Giudice, 2014), and by limiting exposure to settings that afford opportunities to respond in positive ways (Thornberry & Krohn, 2001). Taking this more contextualised approach makes it possible to see involvement in violent extremism as an unfolding process of adapting to stressful or adverse experiences.

Understanding involvement in extremism as a means of adapting to trauma, adversity and environmental stressors in an effort to meet otherwise hard to access needs provides a different way of interpreting the risk factors reflected in SPJ tools. Many risk factors for radicalisation can be understood as maladaptive responses to experiences of trauma and adversity (Dean, 2024). For example, analysis of 422 individuals assessed using the ERG 22+ identified multiple risk factors that were 'strongly present or significant' in over 40 per cent of cases (Elliott et al., 2023). These include factors that align with maladaptive responses to trauma, such as a need to redress injustice or defend against threat (e.g., Canetti-Nisim et al., 2009; Canetti et al. 2021), or for identity, meaning and belonging (e.g., Mattsson & Johansson, 2020).

More generally, aggression, avoidance, and arousal have been identified as potential risk factors for violence and threat responses to trauma (Bates-Maves & O'Sullivan, 2017). Interpreting the relevance of events and experiences captured in risk assessments therefore demands an understanding of an individual's life history and the ways in which 'risky' behaviours come to be understood as an appropriate means of responding to adversity, and of meeting fundamental psychological needs.

## LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

**Key Points**

Contextualising observed cognitions and behaviours within an individual's life history can help practitioners interpret individual behaviour.

Considering the stage of life and engagement at which an experience of trauma occurred can enable practitioners to interpret the effects that it might have produced, and the potential relevance of that trauma to risk.

Trauma-informed approaches illustrate the benefits of adopting a life-course approach to interpreting the nature and impact of adverse events and experiences (Lewis et al., 2024a). Trauma can occur at and across the life course, and across the four stages of engagement in violent extremism: pre-engagement; engagement; disengagement; and post-disengagement (Lewis et al., 2024a). The stage of engagement and age at which a traumatic event occurs can shape how it is experienced.

Traumas experienced earlier in life can produce particularly severe developmental effects (van der Kolk, 2005) which can in turn present as cognitions and

behaviours that have been associated with an increased risk of radicalisation later in life (Windisch et al., 2022). When viewed in the context of childhood adversity, these cognitions and behaviours might be understood less as indicators of risk, and more as normal, albeit maladaptive, responses to early-life trauma.

Individual responses to traumatic experiences are shaped by the actual and perceived barriers and opportunities available to someone in a specific context (Dean, 2024). This has the potential to play out in different ways across stages of engagement in violent extremism (Lewis et al., 2024a). For example, in the pre-engagement period, Windisch et al. (2022) discuss how, as a consequence of growing up in contexts marked by a lack of familial support, former white supremacists 'felt unable to process, vent, and reaffirm their sense of self appropriately' in the wake of childhood trauma. In the absence of pro-social alternatives for processing their trauma, these individuals instead came to adopt 'maladaptive coping mechanisms' to meet this need, which manifested as risk factors for radicalisation, and ultimately engagement in extremism.

An understanding of the stage and age at which an individual encountered adversity can help practitioners interpret the role of trauma. For example, Rolling et al. (2022) used the presentation of clinical and sub-clinical trauma responses in one case to explore both how maladaptive responses to pre-engagement trauma made an individual more susceptible to engaging with extremist content and how, after they had engaged with this content online, the material was able to reactivate the maladaptive responses in ways that contributed to further radicalisation towards violence.

The significance of trauma symptomology identified during one stage of engagement can be more fully understood in the context of an individual's life history. The same is true for those who are disengaging, or who have disengaged from violent extremism. It might be assumed that trauma symptomology identified during the disengagement or post-disengagement periods is linked to engagement-related experiences that, objectively at least, are understood as highly distressing (Lewis et al., 2024a). However, it might be that this symptomology is evidence of the distress provoked by the process of disengagement (Fisher-Smith et al., 2020), or challenges in the post-disengagement period (Carroll, 2022). These forms of disengagement or post-disengagement trauma are important for risk assessment, as they draw attention to the challenges that might contribute to an increased risk of recidivism.

## SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL CONTEXTS

**Key Points**

Different contexts produce different opportunities, constraints, and resources for adapting to trauma and adversity in pro-social ways.

Factors existing at different levels of social ecology - including individual, social, environmental, historical, and systemic factors - and past experiences of trauma can shape the meanings that individuals attach to events.

Past adaptations to trauma can figuratively and literally shape the contexts in which individuals exist in ways that can increase the risk of radicalisation.

Dominant models of trauma-informed practice adopt a socio-ecological approach to understand trauma and its effects (e.g., SAMHSA, 2014), as do several researchers who study violent extremism from a trauma-informed perspective (e.g., Ellis et al., 2022b; Weine et al., 2020; Cardeli et al., 2022). Socio-ecological perspectives draw attention to the contexts in which trauma is experienced, and the individual, social, environmental, historical, and systemic features that can shape how individuals experience, attach meaning to, and adapt to trauma (Lewis et al., 2024a; Dean, 2024).

Trauma can be a feature of the contexts in which individuals live, and individuals may be affected by traumas that emerge at the societal, community, or familial level of analysis (Lewis et al., 2024a). An individual's development is therefore 'a function of the strengths and challenges reflected across multiple levels of their social ecology' (Ellis et al., 2022b, p. 1322). Not least as someone's social-ecological context determines the resources that are available to adapt to trauma in positive ways that contribute to resilience, or in negative ways that contribute to risk (Koehler, 2020).

Taking account of the intersections between individual and environmental factors provides a way of interpreting whether and how individuals can adapt to traumatic or stressful events (Niconchuk, 2021). This perspective also recognises that repeated experiences of trauma can produce a cumulative effect, and a 'downward spiral' (Windisch et al., 2022) towards violent extremism. Maladaptive responses to past trauma might figuratively or literally create the contexts in which radicalisation becomes more likely, either by contributing to an increased level of cognitive vulnerability (Windisch et al., 2022), or by leading individuals into physical contexts where they encounter violent extremist actors and recruiters (Logan et al., 2022).

A trauma-informed approach draws attention to how adaptive responses to past trauma can shape the context in which subsequent life events are experienced (Thornberry & Krohn, 2001). Just as the pre-existing features of a context can determine the resources that an individual has to adapt positively to trauma, so too can adaptive responses to earlier trauma. That is, a maladaptive response to a past trauma can reduce the real or perceived resources that an individual possesses to respond to a subsequent experience in a more positive way:

> **A trauma-informed perspective recognises that trauma histories – broadly defined – are usefully understood as part of the context of an individual's life that shapes behaviours and attitudes, and the repertoire of adaptive responses that are available to them.**
>
> **(Lewis et al., 2024a, p. 65)**

This perspective highlights that adaptive responses to trauma do not just emerge in contexts shaped by past trauma, they can also come to shape the contexts in which individuals now live (Lewis et al., 2024a). Cognitions and behaviours can therefore only be understood by considering the broader context in and from which they emerge.

A key strength of trauma-informed perspectives is their ability to identify and explore the presence and impact of 'hidden traumas' (Grossman et al., 2021; Counter-Extremism Project, 2022), including those more historical or systemic forms of trauma that can become features of social-ecological contexts. Whilst there is space for considering such factors using more traditional approaches to risk assessment (Lloyd, 2019), truly trauma-informed perspectives draw more explicit attention to the trauma that is produced by macro-level systems and structures, and how the lasting effects of systemic or structural traumas can shape how events are experienced (Esaki et al., 2022; Scott & Jenney, 2023).

Sensitivity to these 'structural aspects of trauma experience' can in turn help ensure that practitioners do not exacerbate these experiences by, for example, not considering power imbalances that mark their relationships with the individual being assessed (Scott & Jenney, 2023). Similarly, recognising that an interaction with an individual, or the context of that interaction, might itself be triggering can support more accurate risk assessment as it invites a more contextualised understanding of observed behaviours and cognitions (Rajaraman et al., 2022).

## DYNAMIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF RISK

**Key Points**

Risk is dynamic and can vary across different contexts and at different times.

Attention to past experiences of trauma can help interpret why certain cognitions and behaviours present in particular contexts and times.

Indicators included in current risk assessment tools typically cover dynamic and static risk factors. Dynamic factors are those amenable to treatment, such as behaviours or cognitions believed to be associated with risk, and static factors that are fixed, such as past offending (Bates-Maves & O'Sullivan, 2017). Although dynamic risk factors are incorporated into risk assessment instruments, practitioners have suggested these may not go far enough (Hewitt et al., 2022). Current tools may therefore be less able to capture rapid change and may be insufficiently responsive to the impact of situational factors on risk. A further challenge is that trauma and its effects might present differently according to the context someone is in at a given time (Jones, 2022). This demands a robust and nuanced way of interpreting change and invites a more dynamic assessment of risk across time and space.

Distinguishing between static and dynamic risk factors provides some insight into how distal forms of trauma might be understood as a contextual factor, knowledge of which can support practitioners when interpreting risk. This is underpinned by the idea that the effects of past trauma can manifest as criminogenic risk factors in the present (Bates-Maves & O'Sullivan, 2017; Fritzon et al., 2021). As Jones (2022) notes, assessment contexts can be marked by 'ongoing trauma' and/or by 'trauma reminders', both of which can 'present a destabilising context for the individual' (p. 56).

Bates-Maves and O'Sullivan (2017) conceptualise childhood trauma as a static risk factor, and the psychological and behavioural impacts of trauma as dynamic risk factors relevant to interpreting recidivism risk. In turn, they argue that understanding the lasting effects of past trauma on an individual can help practitioners interpret and address present-day behaviours and cognitions that may be emblematic of risk:

> **A [practitioner] who does not know the rates of [trauma] among [clients], and how these experiences are connected to current behavioral [sic] patterns, cannot fully understand or appreciate how and why clients demonstrate such behaviors [sic]. Considering the same behavioral [sic] patterns through the lens of trauma adds context, both social and physiological, and provides direction towards remediation and appropriate care.**
>
> **(Bates-Maves & O'Sullivan, 2017: 96)**

The clinical and sub-clinical effects of trauma may also be evident in how radicalised or at-risk individuals interact with practitioners (Campelo et al., 2022; Rolling et al., 2022). Practitioners who understand trauma and its effects will be better placed to identify and interpret the relevance of trauma responses when they present. This research therefore highlights the different ways in which diagnosable clinical, observable sub-clinical, and more subtle developmental effects of trauma might present during the process of risk assessment; how these trauma responses may be related to radicalisation risk; and how they could be incorporated into risk formulations.

However, whilst this distinction between dynamic and static risk factors is useful, it does not adequately reflect the idea that risk can vary markedly across time and place; that dynamic risk factors observed in one context may not necessarily present in another; and that the risk posed by an individual may in turn fluctuate markedly over relatively short time-frames depending on the context they are in at any one time.

# CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The above discussion has illustrated how a broader understanding of how individuals adapt to trauma and adversity can help practitioners assess clients in CVE and CT contexts by drawing attention to the psychosocial needs that sit beneath observed risk factors, and the function served by engagement in violent extremism.

Reframing 'risky' cognitions and behaviours as adaptive responses to contexts and circumstances perceived as threatening provides the foundation for a more holistic assessment. This would consider whether and how trauma might have manifested in an individual's life history and be embedded in or produced at different levels of an individual's social ecology (Ellis et al., 2022b). This process facilitates the identification of psychological and behavioural responses to trauma that manifest in individual behaviour. When working with at risk or radicalised individuals, this also invites practitioners to consider the different forms of trauma that might be induced by violent extremist groups and/ or their propaganda, and which in turn become an active, dynamic feature of the contexts in which individuals live (Koehler, 2020; Rolling et al., 2022). This contextualised approach enables a more dynamic assessment of risk which recognises that risk might fluctuate in different contexts, and at different times.

A trauma-informed approach can inform scenario planning by inviting practitioners to focus on whether and how the features of an individual's context are anticipated to change, and how these changes might impact their level of future risk. These processes are not mutually exclusive. For example, an initial risk assessment completed upon conviction of a terrorism offence might identify a history of early life trauma and the absence of protective factors which contributed to the development of maladaptive coping mechanisms that, over time generated an increased vulnerability to radicalisation (Windisch et al., 2022). Upon release from prison, a pre-release risk assessment would benefit from considering whether the individual has now developed more pro-social ways of coping with this earlier trauma, and the extent to which the features of the post-release context might support or inhibit the continued use of these more pro-social strategies (Jones, 2022). Entering a post-release environment that does not offer the requisite resources to pursue these pro-social coping mechanisms, or which exposes individuals to sources of post-disengagement trauma (Lewis et al., 2024a), increases the likelihood of returning to more maladaptive strategies. When viewed in the context of a previous radicalisation trajectory, this might indicate increased risk of recidivism.

Practitioners seeking to understand the potential risk posed by individuals who have experienced trauma will benefit from considering the broader context in which individuals exist, and the opportunities and barriers those contexts provide for pursuing pro-social lives (Dean, 2024). This contextualised approach is a feature of SPJ approaches. However, a trauma-informed approach can help practitioners explore different levels of an individual's social ecology, including systemic or structural factors, in a holistic way (Grossman et al., 2021). Taken together, efforts to examine trauma through a traditional SPJ framework benefit from a nuanced approach that:

1. Does not assume that trauma history is predictive of risk.

2. Recognises that any relationship between trauma history and radicalisation risk is likely to be indirect and mediated or moderated by different factors.

3. Takes a broad approach to defining and identifying trauma and its effects.

4. Is informed by an understanding of different adaptive responses to trauma, the contexts in which they emerge, and how they might contribute to risk.

5. Acknowledges that an individual's trauma history may influence how they behave and respond to practitioners.

A trauma-informed perspective can be used alongside existing SPJ approaches in different ways. Depending on the context and client, it could be used to scaffold the entire assessment process, or as a complementary framework used alongside SPJ tools. In either case, it has the potential to offer important insights into individual journeys towards, into, and out of violent extremism.

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