

Why It Should Be Us: The Case for Social Work to Lead Alt-Right Radicalisation Interventions

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Abstract

The growth of the alt-right across all western countries presents itself as a critical social justice issue. The increase in white-supremist motivated violence has led to countering violent extremism (CVE), a field of practice, policy and research, being repurposed to provide responses and interventions. Through exploring literature related to CVE this paper aims to demonstrate the need for social work, in research and practice, to lead the formulation of interventions that are specific in responding to alt-right radicalisation. Ultimately outlining the reasons why social work researchers and academics should aim to provide guidance to practitioners in this field. These being: the proximity of social work to the issue, and the benefits of a social justice lens within interventions. Given the lack of current social work interest in exploring the alt-right, it also aims to outline what is the alt-right, and what radicalisation looks like.

Key Words:

Alt-right, Interventions, Social Justice

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Introduction

The recent rise of far right and white supremacist violence across the western world represents a major threat to the safety of global communities and individuals. Recent terrorist attacks including those in Christchurch, El Paso Texas and Poway California, were perpetrated by those with direct links to alt-right. This increase in violent extremism has been accompanied by the mainstream growth of the alt-right and expansion of these communities online. The growth of the alt-right presents itself as a social justice issue due to the clear propensity for harm it presents to both those involved and the broader community. Given the prevalence of attacks and growth of the community, formulating responses to alt-right radicalisation has become a priority for governments and policy makers. The way of responding which has been consistent amongst most Western countries is the application of existing countering violence extremism (CVE) policy toward the alt-right. This is reflected in both literature surrounding responses to the alt-right and within policies, resulting in a lack of specific interventions that address the alt-right. Whilst inherently tied to ‘on the ground’ interventions and preventative measures, social work academia has made very little contributions to research or guidance for practice.

Through exploring literature surrounding countering violent extremism and the few contributions of social work academics in this field, it will be demonstrated that social work is well positioned to inform practice and policy responses through increased attention from social work academics. In tandem, it will be shown that existing CVE interventions are inappropriate for addressing the rise of alt-right radicalisation and thus new responses, with social work at the helm, should be formulated. As the alt-right is a relatively unexplored, particularly amongst social work researchers and practitioners, what it is and how radicalisation processes happen will need to be described first.

What is the alt-right and the alt-right ‘pipeline’?

There is a lack of clarity both in academia and broader culture surrounding the definition of what exactly is the alt-right. The term originated from far-right commentator Richard Spencer who coined the term ‘alternative right’ and started a blog with the same name. As defined by the Southern Poverty Law Centre (n.d), the alt-right “is a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that “white identity” is under attack by multicultural forces using

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“political correctness” and “social justice” to undermine white people and “their” civilization.” Other key beliefs associated with the alt-right include anti-immigration, nationalism, misogyny, antisemitism and racism. The alt-right can be considered a global community of individuals that share these beliefs. What differentiates the alt-right from similar far-right political groups is their makeup, their primarily online existence, a lack of centralised movement or leadership, a propensity for violence both online and offline, and a lack of political engagement outside cultural concerns.

Those who are ‘part’ of the alt-right have been shown to be diverse (Hawley, 2018) however, young white males are those most likely to engage in alt-right communities online and commit acts of violence because of radicalisation (Nilan, 2021). Alt-right communities exist online on a vast array of social media platforms however those in which these communities flourish exist outside of the mainstream including 8kun (8chan), Parler and telegram.

To understand radicalisation processes across the alt-right it is important to firstly outline what is meant by radicalisation. For the purposes of this paper, alt-right radicalisation will be understood as the process by which individuals adopt far/alt-right beliefs to the extent that these beliefs threaten to manifest in targeted violence against individuals or communities. Outlining the mechanisms of this process is beyond the scope of this paper, however it is important to consider the plethora of ways in which radicalisation can happen. Given the near universal usage of social media platforms, particularly by young people, exposure to alt-right communities and content is highly likely given its prevalence across popular platforms like Facebook, TikTok and Twitter. The term alt-right ‘pipeline’ has been adopted to describe the transformative process by which someone begins this process of radicalisation, among alt-right circles this is also known as ‘redpilling’ (Munn, 2019; Scully, 2021).

This pipeline often begins at seemingly harmless points of online interaction, such as browsing YouTube for self-help videos, participating in online forums discussing masculinity, watching TikTok’s around new age spirituality, or scrolling through mainstream politician’s Twitter feeds (Roose, 2019; Romano, 2018;). Through exposure to these comparatively tame expressions of right-wing beliefs, individuals often find themselves going deeper through the pipeline and accessing increasingly hateful or dangerous material (see Roose, 2019 for a real example).

Evidence has also emerged in recent US congressional hearings and Australian parliamentary

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inquiries around mainstream social media platforms pushing users towards polarising political communities as they promote higher engagement (Frenkel, 2021; Galloway, 2021). The insidious nature of the alt-right pipeline and its clear pathway to violence, as has been demonstrated through the online behaviours of numerous mass shooters and the January 6 attacks on the United States capital, presents a major social justice concern. This is particularly true when considering the range of systemic and individual factors which may influence radicalisation to varying degrees.

Whilst the ways in which individuals can enter the pipeline are varied, there are a range of factors which can contribute to the adoption of alt-right beliefs. Regardless of the mechanisms of radicalisation, much of the appeal of alt-right beliefs comes from the responses which they offer to genuine issues. Social isolation being a clear example as alt-right communities online can provide individuals a sense of belonging and purpose (Bernatzky, Costello & Hawdon, 2022). The alt-right more broadly also offers an alternative to the current neoliberal political systems which are prevalent across the western world. Regardless of any misguided placement of causation, alt-right beliefs can serve to counter the real impacts of rising inequality, a lack of trust in the state and increasing polarisation (Cooper, 2021). Other factors which can increase the likelihood of engagement with the alt-right include having a mental illness or having an intellectual disability (Bhui, 2018; Caton & Landman, 2022). This range of factors are neither entirely predictive of adoption of alt-right beliefs nor necessary for its adoption to occur. They do however highlight the vulnerabilities of many individuals involved, as well as the need to consider the micro and macro systems which serve to embolden beliefs or increase the appeal of radicalisation.

CVE and existing interventions

The field of practice, research and policy known as countering violent extremism (CVE) (also referred to as ‘preventing violent extremism’ in some contexts) developed in its current form as a response to the terrorist attacks on September eleven, 2001, and the resulting ‘war on terror’. CVE in policy and research has primarily been concerned with the threat of religious based acts of violence and terror, predominately those perpetrated by Muslims.

What CVE approaches entail varies widely but primarily it consists of police or justice system efforts toward prevention or interventions aimed at behaviour change, both with the goal of

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instilling social cohesion (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle & Zammit, 2016). What exactly CVE is responding to is loosely defined across the globe. This is due to difficulties in defining radicalisation and extremism. Further issues arise in co-ordination of CVE approaches as there is a broad range of 'extremist' views that exist and a constantly adapting political and cultural landscape (Harris-Hogan et al, 2016; Stanley, Guru & Gupta, 2018). This lack of clarity is reflected across research into interventions for radicalisation and in macro level responses to violent extremism.

Types of CVE interventions are generally categorised into one of three groups. Primary interventions are ones that work on building community resilience through education and other preventative measures. Secondary interventions are individual or group interventions which are targeted at those who are showing signs of radicalisation or exhibiting some signs of extremist beliefs. Lastly, tertiary interventions are those that are conducted with already radicalised individuals such as those convicted of terrorist offences (Weine et al, 2017; Harris-Hogan et al, 2016).

Since the threat of far-right extremist violence has become an increasing security and safety issue in western countries (McDonald, 2020; Department of Homeland Security, 2022), CVE policies and research have been expanded to incorporate far-right and alt-right extremism (Harris-Hogan et al, 2016). Encapsulating responses to the alt-right within CVE approaches has some inherent concerns for both practising with radicalised individuals, and for policy. Whilst the parallels between right-wing extremism and religious based extremism are apparent, the radicalisation process as well as the type of interventions necessary at early stages can be vastly different (Cherney et al, 2018; Finch et al, 2022). The lack of differentiation between types of extremism suggests that CVE is not adequately responding to the needs and risks of individuals involved in interventions, nor is it considerate of the quickly adapting landscape of radicalisation processes and mechanisms. To identify why interventions for those at risk of alt-right radicalisation need to be unique, and why social work is well positioned to be involved with intervention at all levels, it is first important to consider literature concerning broader CVE interventions.

The current landscape of interventions

There are a range of interventions which currently exist within CVE that work at varying stages of the radicalisation process. As is the case with research regarding radicalisation, most (if not

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all) of these interventions have been formulated with the intention of addressing radicalisation among Muslims (see Acil Allen Consulting, 2019). The lack of far-right or alt-right specific literature is of concern considering the increasing prevalence of radicalisation and manifestations of violence amongst that group. In considering what targeted social work interventions may look like and where research efforts ought to be focused, it is important to firstly consider findings of broader CVE literature that discuss interventions at varying stages. In their scoping review of scholarly literature on CVE interventions, Pistone et al (2019) identified a severe lack of evidence-based practice in the field. They were able to identify several suggestions of positive impacts from interventions however measures of de-radicalisation weren't as clear. They also identified a lack of consistency across intervention research in both methodology and findings.

Moreover, they raise a concern that is shared across much of the literature, that measuring outcomes is inherently difficult due to the lack of clarity around radicalisation processes and a range of definitions within CVE. What Pistone et al (2019) ultimately highlight is that if "evidence-based practice" continues to be something which those intervening strive to deliver, then considerably more research needs to be done to create an evidence base. This is further complicated due to the breadth of the CVE, and the need for specific interventions for different forms of radicalisation (Harris-Hogan et al, 2016). Whilst this is supportive of the need for far-right/alt-right specific interventions, it would also demand considerable resources to conduct such research. However, a steep increase in resourcing to conduct far-right/alt-right related research is proportional to the increase in threat to public safety.

Cherney & Belton's (2021) evaluation of case-managed programs provides some indication of what successful interventions may look like. In their study of two separate interventions delivered by Australian police, they were able to demonstrate positive changes amongst individuals that participated in interventions. Their findings suggest that standard 'casework' practises that focus on areas such as education, employment, mental health and family support can contribute to de-radicalisation. This contributes to the argument that social work is well positioned to participate and lead interventions regarding CVE as caseworks skills such as those demonstrated above are central to the profession, particularly when working in complex family environments (Damiani-Taraba et al, 2017).

In a state funded evaluation of CVE programs in New South Wales Australia, several of the

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concerns raised in research are clearly found to be realised in intervention practice (Acil Allen Consulting, 2019). This report recognises that interventions on all levels can be effective in countering radicalisation, particularly at early preventative stages within the community. The positive factors which contributed to program success were identified as a widespread approach to CVE that incorporates schools, services, communities, and government, as well as intensive case management. Some of the concerns raised include a lack of collaboration between agencies, difficulty in measuring outcomes of programs, a lack of individualised case management and a lack of responsiveness to the changing nature of radicalisation, namely, the increase in right wing extremism (Acil Allen Consulting, 2019). Whilst this review is specific to the CVE policy and interventions of a single locality (NSW), it is reflective of the concerns raised in broader literature (Cherney, 2022; 2020; Davey, Tuck & et Amarasingam, 2019). This reiterates both the need for the formulation of alt-right specific interventions as well as the need to rethink CVE more broadly.

Davey et al's (2019) report provides unique insight into interventions as it assessed international interventions for left and right wing extremism. They begin their report by acknowledging that whilst governments internationally are beginning to recognise the increased need for interventions targeting right wing extremism, there are significant gaps in knowledge, skills for practice and resourcing (Davey et al, 2019 p. 4). In conducting interviews with practitioners working in 'political violence' interventions they identified several key themes. As with other studies (see Stanley et al, 2018; Haugstvedt, 2019), the participants identified a need for further support and training, and difficulty in assessing the success of interventions. Several of their findings were however unique including the practitioners outlining a need to keep up with technology and have capacity to navigate complex online spaces. These findings suggest that those responsible for interventions are ill-equipped to navigate the complexities surrounding the alt-right as they lack the capacity to understand its unique culture (Birdwell, 2020). Davey et al's (2019) report thus presents several implications for policy and practice. Firstly, it demonstrates the need for differentiation between 'traditional' CVE interventions and those for the alt-right. Secondly, it reiterates the need for further research into the field, and the need for practitioners to receive relevant and adaptive guidance for practice.

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The contribution of Social Work to research

The majority of CVE research, as with that discussing the alt-right, comes from the fields of terrorism, psychology, and cultural studies. Whilst limited social work literature that considers alt/far right interventions was able to be identified, there is however a limited amount of social work literature that considers broader CVE interventions. Analysis of social work CVE literature can provide insight into how social work theories and forms of practice can be adapted to formulate interventions specific to the alt-right.

In exploring the views of practitioners surrounding the British CVE intervention PREVENT, an interagency counter terrorism program which aims to provide early interventions for those at risk of radicalisation, Stanley et al (2018) raise several concerns. Firstly, as is consistent across much of the social work CVE literature, they raise the potential of social workers becoming tools for social control (McKendrick & Finch, 2017; Finch et al, 2022). Social workers acting in the 'dual role' i.e., acting as an agent of social control to promote community protection and showing concern for an individual's wellbeing (Ward, Gannon & Fortune, 2014), is common throughout roles within the justice system. Whilst the 'dual role' is not exclusive to social workers, it is a key consideration for anyone practicing within the restorative justice, or deradicalization space (Trotter, 2015). Whilst outside the scope of this paper to discuss fully, the dual role does need to be considered when discussing alt-right radicalisation, given the propensity for violence that resulting extremism can cause. Nevertheless, Stanley et al (2018) demonstrated that giving social workers securitized duties can prohibit them from gaining the trust of their clients. Other concerns present in their findings were the lack of practical tools and clear guidance for practitioners, as well as the challenges of working in a risk sensitive CVE environment. In responding to this, they highlight the usefulness of a strengths-based perspective in conducting effective social work practice, thus demonstrating the value of social work knowledges to CVE interventions:

A strengths-based perspective provides a framework by which social workers can attempt to resist the overwhelmingly negative consequences of risk saturated thinking... Moreover, this can help practitioners to share power more directly with families, working together to assess challenges to family functioning and to identify resources available to overcome those challenges. (Stanley et al, 2018 p.139).

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Finch et al, (2022) conducted a comparative study of CVE approaches between Sweden and the United Kingdom. They focus on discussion surrounding the ethical struggles that social workers face in working within CVE, stressing the need for social workers to be critical of the systems they are working in and the over securitization of all caring professions. One important suggestion from their research is the way in which social workers, regardless of their participation in CVE programs or interventions, are becoming increasingly required to be mindful of radicalisation of all forms. This highlights a need for an expansion of education around radicalisation and CVE in general. This is even more true when considering alt-right extremism given the absence of social work literature on the topic.

The need for social workers to take critical approaches to CVE is reiterated by McKendrick & Finch (2017). Whilst their discussion focuses on Muslim families, it remains relevant when considering the alt right. One major consideration they identified for practice is the presence of institutionalised racism in Western countries and the impact the war on terror has had on Muslim communities across the globe. CVE approaches have often been criticized for racial profiling and further marginalisation of Muslim communities (Hutson, 2021). Lessons can be learnt from these ethical pitfalls. A critical social work approach grounded in social justice would assist in developing community-based responses to radicalisation that considers individual, political, and societal contexts. Hutson (2021, p. 302) discusses the capacity of social work to address these concerns:

While the targeting of minority communities and individuals through a variety of law enforcement and community programs continues in the name of global/national security, advocating for a socially just approach to PVE (preventing violent extremism) using empirically and theoretically supported prevention models should be advocated. Social workers have rightly criticised these initiatives through advocacy and consciousness-raising.

For alt-right specific interventions, critical social work approaches are needed to examine the role the state and its systems play in radicalisation. The way that these systems contribute to the factors which increase the risk of radicalisation also require a critical approach to navigate effectively.

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Conclusions: Why it should be Social Work

The literature surrounding CVE interventions and the alt-right clearly identifies a need for further research and better guidance for practitioners working in the field. There are several potential reasons for the gap in research into what practising with the alt-right looks like. These include a lack of clarity around what the alt-right is, a lack of acknowledgment by policy makers around the need for unique interventions or possibly a lack of clarity over which field of academia or profession is responsible for conducting research in this area. Social work is an appropriate field to address this gap in research for several reasons. Firstly, social workers naturally encounter individuals at most risk of alt-right radicalisation in the course of their practice. Secondly, social work theories and practice knowledge are well positioned to address the complexities of individuals and inform appropriate interventions based on social justice.

Proximity of Social Work

Given the range of biopsychosocial factors that can be predictors of propensity for alt-right radicalisation, social workers would organically be near those requiring some level of intervention. Social workers may encounter those ‘at risk’ within roles across education, justice, or community mental health. Social workers are also commonly those responsible for delivering CVE interventions and do so through using the broad skillset which they already possess (Stanley et al, 2018; Hutson, 2021; Haugstvedt, 2019). Whilst there is a distinction between prevention and intervention, Hutson (2021, p. 299) suggests that “the profession has a long history of impactful work in violence prevention in a myriad of practice areas” and thus has existing capabilities in providing and formulating interventions.

For social workers to effectively practice, regardless of explicit involvement in alt-right radicalisation interventions, more comprehensive and relevant training is required. To achieve this, further research from social work academia is necessary. When considering the aspiration to deliver evidence-based practice, and that social workers are those on the ground in this space, the need for social work to be involved within formulation of an evidence base is clear. Areas of research which social work would have the unique capacity to conduct include identification of factors that influence adoption of alt-right belief and how this is informed by systems, the impact of practitioner’s beliefs on ability to conduct interventions, the influence of community on

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radicalisation, and generalised research into what alt-right radicalisation interventions should practically entail.

Social justice & theory

Whilst it is acknowledged that discussions considering the alt-right are vastly different from Muslim communities, the need to be critical of CVE as a field of practice is clear. Framing the rise of the alt-right, and in turn interventions which address radicalization, as a social justice issue can lead to a more critical approach to responses in policy and practice. The integration of social justice within a range of social work theories and forms of practice thus exemplifies social works suitability for this field. The capacity for social work academics to make contributions to CVE research in this way is beginning to be seen for other specific ‘extremist’ groups (see Ellis et al, 2021; Hutson, 2021). If social work academia was to explore these theories further in the context of the alt-right, solidified frameworks for practice could emerge.

Other key social work theories worthy of further discussion by academics are feminist theories. Given the nature of alt-right beliefs, exploring the role that patriarchal systems play in enabling alt-right communities to grow would provide good insight into how such beliefs can be appropriately challenged. Other theoretical knowledges of note which would be appropriate for further exploration in the context of alt-right interventions may include complexity theory, systems theories, and the life course perspective. Developing links between social work theories, established forms of practice, and interventions would serve to address gaps in literature. This would also assist practitioners in appropriately transferring their existing skillsets and knowledge to appropriate interventions. Ultimately, the integration of social work theories and practice knowledges into interventions would help promote social justice for the individuals involved and consequently the broader community.

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