

The ABC Model: Commentary from the Perspective of the Two Pyramids Model of Radicalization

Clark McCauley

Communications regarding this paper to Clark McCauley, Research Professor of Psychology,
Bryn Mawr College (cmccaule@brynmawr.edu)

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Abstract

In this commentary I compare the ABC model of radicalization with the Two Pyramids model of radicalization. Both models distinguish radicalization of opinion from radicalization of action. Beyond this agreement are questions about the concepts deployed in advancing the ABC model and research issues relating to applications of the two models. I conclude with an optimistic assessment of recent progress in research on terrorism, including the suggestion that deradicalization of action may be forwarded by giving up on deradicalization of opinion.

I thank the editors of *Terrorism and Political Violence* for this opportunity to comment on the ABC model advanced by Khalil, Horgan and Zeuthen.¹ The ABC model has much in common with the Two Pyramids model that colleagues and I have advanced, and I begin by highlighting areas of agreement. Then I raise questions about several of the concepts deployed in advancing the ABC model, and point to directions of research for which the Two Pyramids model and the measures this model employs may be useful in applications of the ABC model. Finally I suggest that deradicalization of action may be forwarded by giving up on deradicalization of opinion.

Distinguishing Radical Ideas from Radical Action

The crux of the ABC model is represented in its full name: the Attitudes-Behavior Corrective model. The correction suggested is to contradict the all-too-easy tendency to conflate extreme ideas with extreme action. I can testify to the ease of conflating ideas and actions as I did just this in 2008 with a single-pyramid model of radicalization that had sympathy with the terrorist cause toward the base and terrorist attacks at the apex.²

Since 2010, however, I have joined with colleagues in nine publications advancing a “corrective” Two Pyramids model of radicalization.³ It is somewhat surprising that Khalil, Horgan and Zeuthen reach back ten years to tax me with errors I have tried to leave behind, rather than directly engaging the Two Pyramids model in comparison with their ABC model.

The Two Pyramids model agrees with the ABC model in making a strong distinction between radical opinion and radical action. From base to apex, the Opinion Pyramid recognizes four levels: *neutral*, *sympathy with terrorist goals*, *justification of terrorist violence*, and *personal moral obligation to join in terrorist violence*. From base to apex, the Action Pyramid recognizes four levels: *inert*, *legal activism*, *illegal radicalism*, and *terrorist attacks on civilians*.

In contrast, the ABC model represents the distinction between opinion and action in a two-dimensional graph that shows the status of an individual in relation to both radicalization of opinion and radicalization of action. The two dimensions are represented as continuous, without the levels suggested in the Two Pyramids model but also without suggestions for how to measure the continua.

Thus, the Two Pyramids model and the ABC model are alike in trying to correct the erroneous assumption that extremist violence is the natural result of extremist ideas. Clearly there is a sticky or meme-like quality to this assumption, which has led to a focus on extremist ideology as the Clausewitzian ‘center of gravity’ of the war on terrorism. The result has been a war of ideas that is supposed to prevent terrorism. A salient example is President Obama’s 2015 Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiative, which supported programs to counter extremist ideas (although these programs have lost support under President Trump).⁴ From the perspective of the Two Pyramids model and the ABC model, CVE is an ambiguous goal in not distinguishing extremist ideas and extremist violence.

The Two Pyramids model and the ABC model agree also that there are two kinds of evidence against the assumption that extremist violence is the result of extremist ideas: 99 percent of individuals with extreme ideas never move to extreme action, and many individuals move to extreme action before adopting extreme ideas.

Both models recognize that many individuals join a militant group for reasons that have little to do with political ideas. McCauley and Moskalenko have described five such reasons (personal grievance, love for a member of a militant group, escape from difficult life circumstances including loneliness, status- and risk-seeking, a slippery slope of increasing involvement).⁵ The ABC model includes a similar list

described as Individual Incentives: “material incentives (salaries and so on), protection, status, a sense of adventure, belonging, vengeance, expected rewards in the afterlife, and a sense of purpose gained through acting in accordance with perceived ideological tenets.”

To sum up this section, I welcome the ABC model to the (so far uphill) fight to recognize extremist ideas as a problem separate from the problem of extremist violence. As well I welcome the recognition that individuals can join in political violence for reasons having nothing to do with political grievance or ideology.

Conceptual Issues

In this section I raise questions about several of the concepts and distinctions advanced in forwarding the ABC model.

Why avoid the concept of radicalization?

The introduction to the ABC model argues that the concept of radicalization has been interpreted to emphasize extremist ideology over political and social drivers of violence, and that the concept has been used promiscuously to refer to sympathy for an extremist cause, sympathy for violence in furthering that cause, or actual participation in violence for the cause. These frailties lead the ABC authors to avoid using the concept of radicalization.

As noted earlier in relation to the war of ideas, I agree that radicalization is too often interpreted in terms of political ideology. But distinguishing extremist opinion from extremist action resolves this problem by focusing separate attention on radicalization of action. Similarly, distinguishing *sympathizers* and *justifiers* in the Opinion Pyramid resolves the uncertainties of meaning in relation to opinion radicalization.

A significant cost of avoiding reference to radicalization is that security officials and scholars both need a word to refer to what precedes and leads to extreme opinion and extreme action. Radicalization became a popular concept in response to efforts to “get to the left of the boom” in understanding and predicting terrorist attacks. If we avoid referring to radicalization, how will we refer to the psychology that precedes terrorist action? It seems to me that if we stop referring to *radicalization* (in general), and refer only to *radicalization of opinion* or *radicalization of action*, the concept of radicalization becomes analytically tractable and useful.

Indeed the ABC model appears to be a two-dimensional model of radicalization, mapping trajectories of radicalization and de-radicalization. If not, what is it a model of?

What do the ABC authors intend by distinguishing ‘why’ versus ‘how’ an individual moves about in the attitude-behavior plot?

What is the difference between *why* and *how* an individual sympathizes with a terrorist cause, or between *why* and *how* an individual engages in violence for a terrorist cause? Is this the difference between motive, on one hand, and means and opportunity on the other? If so, this potentially useful distinction is perhaps not fully unpacked in relation to the ABC model. For instance, what would be the issue of means and opportunity that would apply to developing an extremist attitude?

There may be significant nuance in distinguishing motive from means and opportunity. In the case of Dr. al-Balawi, whose suicide bombing at Khost killed several high-level CIA agents, months of Internet flaming in support of jihad and suicide bombing did not lead him to any radical action. Then Jordanian

intelligence officers forced al-Balawi to go to Pakistan to try to make contact with Dr. al-Zawahiri. Connection with jihadist militants provided means and opportunity and al-Balawi moved from radical opinion to radical action. This case shows how means and opportunity can motivate action: al-Balawi wrote that he would be ashamed not to take up the bomb vest once it was offered.⁶

Why focus the ABC model on ideologically justified violence?

In particular, the ABC model is said to focus on sympathy for ideologically justified violence, and on engagement in ideologically justified violence. All four Figures representing the ABC model label the opinion dimension as “extent of sympathy for ideologically justified violence,” and label the action dimension as “extent of involvement in ideologically justified violence.”

The first uncertainty here is that the definition of ideology (in relation to terrorism) is highly contested, as is the importance of ideology in relation to understanding and combatting terrorism. One of the ABC authors, John Horgan, has recently referred to these disputes in a paper entitled “Terrorism and ideology: Cracking the nut.”⁷

Another kind of uncertainty is that the focus on ideologically justified violence seems to contradict the authors’ concern about the concept of radicalization—that it is too often interpreted in terms of political ideology. Why then make ideologically justified violence the focus of ABC attention? Especially when the ABC model explicitly recognizes the many self-interested motives (Individual Incentives) that can move individuals to join a militant group.

One might try to say that the ABC model’s Individual Incentives are indeed ideological. This seems to me a step too far. Material incentives, protection, status, adventure, and belonging are not ideological. Nor is vengeance. If I sympathize with violence against those who hurt us, if I engage in violence against those who hurt us—they did it to us so we’re doing it to them—this justification is more revenge than ideology. Reciprocity and revenge—an eye for an eye—is something close to a universal human impulse, often having the status of a moral norm. But there is nothing ideological about this impulse, and no reason to dignify vengeance as a form of ideology.

Research Issues

This third section examines research issues relating to the ABC model in the light of the Two Pyramids model.

Measurement

The two-dimensional ABC model is a conceptual advance, in that it can show on a single plot an individual’s degree of radicalization in both opinion and action. The Two Pyramids model, less succinctly, must show an individual’s level of radicalization separately in the opinion and action pyramids.

Despite its conceptual appeal, use of the two-dimensional ABC plot may be difficult in practice. The representation of the ABC model in Figure 4, for instance, shows hypothetical individual trajectories of radicalization and deradicalization over time. These trajectories assume repeated measures data—longitudinal data—at the individual level. Such data are usually difficult to acquire. I am not aware of any repeated radicalization measures for real individuals that could be represented in trajectories such as those shown in Figure 4.

A related issue concerns measurement of attitude and behavior in the ABC model. As noted earlier, the ABC model does not include any suggestions for measuring an individual's position on the two dimensions. In contrast, The Two Pyramids model offers measurement suggestions for both the Opinion Pyramid and the Action Pyramid, and these suggestions can be implemented in mass polling as well as individual assessment.

For the Opinion Pyramid, sympathy for the jihadist cause has been assessed with the following question: *Do you feel the war on terrorism is a war against Islam? (Yes; No; Not sure/Don't know)*. Internet polls using this question showed that US Muslims answering yes declined from 47 percent in January 2016 to 30 percent in June 2016 and 32 percent in October 2016.⁸

Also for the Opinion Pyramid, justification for jihadist violence has been assessed with the following question: *Some people think that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies. Other people believe that, no matter what the reason, this kind of violence is never justified. Do you personally feel that this kind of violence is often justified to defend Islam, sometimes justified, rarely justified or never justified?* The same 2016 internet polls showed little change in answering this question: Often or sometimes justified totaled 10, 8, and 9 percent in January, June, and October 2016.

For the Action Pyramid, there is no polling measure of behavior, but behavioral intentions can be assessed with the Activism Radicalism Intention Scales (ARIS).⁹ The Activism Intention Scale asks about costly but legal actions in support of a political cause (e.g. *I would join/belong to an organization that fights for my group's political and legal rights*). The Radicalism Intention Scale asks about violent and/or illegal actions in support of a political cause (e.g. *I would attack police or security forces if I saw them beating members of my group*). Distinguishing between activism and radicalism can be useful in supporting a psychologically important comparison: comparison of those who do and do not use violence in trying to forward the same cause.¹⁰

In short, the Two Pyramids model of radicalization has implemented measurement of radical opinions and radical intentions that can be used for both individual and mass assessments. The ABC model does not suggest how to measure the continuous attitude and behavior dimensions hypothesized

Structural Motivators, Individual Incentives, and Enabling Factors in the ABC model

The representation of the ABC model in Figure 3 offers a theory of the drivers of radicalization of attitude and behavior. Figure 3 is titled *Categories of Drivers in Relation to Attitudes and Behaviors (according to RCT)*; it shows Structural Motivators and Enabling Factors driving radicalization of attitude, and shows Individual Incentives and Enabling Factors driving radicalization of action. Here I want to focus on Structural Motivators, which include "state repression, political exclusion, corruption, poverty, inequality and discrimination." In other words, Structural Motivators are political grievances, and Figure 3 indicates that political grievances drive radical opinions but not radical action.

This is a startling claim, and text related to Figure 3 moderates the claim with a suggestion that Structural Motivators can contribute to radicalization of action by making individuals more open to Individual Incentives and Enabling Factors. In this way Structural Motivators can become an indirect driver of radical action.

But the 'indirect driver' suggestion has difficulty accounting for some terrorist cases. Lone-wolf terrorists, including some who are suicide terrorists, often leave a manifesto that points directly to a political grievance (Structural Motivator) as the motive and justification of their attack. These are

individuals at the extreme of action radicalization who act without support from others (without Enabling Factors) and with Individual Incentives (material incentives, protection, status, a sense of adventure, belonging, vengeance) that are usually considered weaker than the value of life and liberty.

It is possible that a rare individual is ready to risk life and liberty for the last two Individual Incentives cited in the ABC model: purpose and rewards in the afterlife. But there are terrorists who are not acting for these or other personal benefits. There are individuals who care so much about a victim group that they are emotionally impelled to action against the perceived victimizers.¹¹ Clayton Waagner, for instance, twice shut down U.S. abortion centers with letters containing fake anthrax powder; he left wife and children behind because he felt he had to do something to save infants from abortion. Waagner and other caring-compelled terrorists do not seem to fit any of the ABC model's Individual Incentives for terrorism.

One might argue a form of Individual Incentive in which identification with a group or cause can be strong enough to overpower self-interest. Caring more for group or cause than for self can then motivate self-sacrifice, even sacrifice of life and liberty.¹² This understanding of Individual Incentive would, however, undermine the ABC model's Rational Choice Theory framing of Individual Incentives as personal benefits of violent action.

But perhaps there is no need to focus on Individual Incentives or the other drivers hypothesized in the ABC model. "Research into violent extremism commonly relies on classification systems of candidate drivers. While many systems exist ... we suggest that researchers can rely on almost any classification system, provided of course they can be applied in a manner that incorporates all relevant drivers in each location."

Thus, it is not clear whether the ABC model is essentially the two-dimensional mapping of attitude and behavior, with a three-driver theory loosely recommended, or whether the ABC model includes both the mapping and the three-driver theory.

Deradicalization and disengagement

In the Two Pyramids model, deradicalization means moving lower in the Opinion Pyramid and disengagement means moving lower in the Action Pyramid. Recent experience in the UK has discovered a strategy to give up on deradicalization in order to maximize disengagement. The key is to give up on arguing grievance.¹³

A Muslim who watches victim videos is likely to have a strong grievance against Western actions in Muslim countries. Victim videos show women and children killed and maimed by munitions leaving shards stamped "Made in USA". If deradicalization means giving up the perception of grievance, then deradicalization is an uphill battle.¹⁴

In the UK, individuals convicted of terrorist-related offenses are released into the hands of parole officers. These officers have found it useful to give up arguing grievance, to admit that Western policies and forces are doing terrible things in Muslim countries. Then they move on to what can be done, what should be done to lessen Muslim suffering. Is jihadist violence the best way? Does jihadist violence help at all to lessen Muslim suffering? Is terrorist bombing of innocents better than US bombing of innocents?

In the Two Pyramids model, accepting grievance means giving up on deradicalization of opinion: giving up on sympathy for the jihadist cause (responding to a war on Islam), giving up on justifying jihadist violence (revenge may be morally justified), even giving up on personal moral obligation to fight for victimized Muslims.

Instead UK parole officers try to focus discussion on the Action Pyramid. If terrorist attacks are not the best way to help Muslims, what is? Perhaps illegal action that stops short of killing civilians would work better? Perhaps legal activism would work better? This kind of discussion, about the pragmatics of action, is easier than persuading a young Muslim that he has no grievance, that Muslims are not in fact suffering from Western actions in Muslim countries.

A similar switch from deradicalization of opinion to deradicalization of action might help with right-wing militants. A major right-wing grievance is the so-called Replacement Theory that white Americans are being replaced by minorities and immigrants. Demographically, the right-wing militants are correct; perhaps they might move lower in the Action Pyramid if we admitted they have a grievance and moved to talking about what might best be done to minimize the threat they feel.

In short, a promising approach to disengagement depends on giving up on deradicalization of opinion. Only the Two Pyramids model and the ABC model can see and theorize the distinction between radical opinion and radical action on which the new strategy depends. Only the Two Pyramids model and the ABC model are conceptually equipped to conduct research testing the effectiveness of the new strategy.

Conclusion

As described in the preceding sections, there are aspects of the ABC model that I do not understand. Conceptually it is not clear what is meant by ‘why’ versus ‘how’ an individual moves about in the attitude-behavior plot, or what it means that the ABC model is focused on “ideologically justified violence.” In relation to research it is not clear how the attitude and behavior dimensions are to be measured in the ABC model, or how the three kinds of drivers (*Structural Motivators, Individual Incentives, Enabling Factors*) can comprehend individuals who put the welfare of their group above their own welfare. Theoretically it is not clear whether the ABC model means only the two-dimensional attitude-behavior plot, or whether the three kinds of drivers hypothesized are an integral part of the model.

In a larger perspective, I don’t feel the pessimism expressed by the authors of the ABC model. I don’t agree that “Progress in understanding and responding to terrorism and violent extremism has continued to stall...” Sophia Moskalenko and I found it difficult even in a book-length review to do justice to recent progress in terrorism research.¹⁵ I don’t believe we need to give up the concept of radicalization. We need only give up talking about *radicalization* and agree to talk only about *radicalization of opinion* or *radicalization of action*.

Together, the Two Pyramids model and the ABC model offer hope of a new consensus that understanding and countering extremist opinion is a different problem than understanding and countering extremist violence. My optimism is limited only by the difficulty of bringing security officials, political leaders and ultimately citizens to share in understanding that fighting terrorism does not require fighting free speech, hate speech, or extremist ideas.

Notes

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⁶ Turcan and McCauley, “Boomerang.”

⁷ Donald Holbrook and John Horgan, “Terrorism and ideology: Cracking the nut,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 6 (2019): 2-15. <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2019/issue-6/01-holbrook-and-horgan.pdf>

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