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Identity Optionality and the Equal-Alternative Narrative Model: A Needs-Based Framework for Countering Violent Extremism

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Abstract
This paper proposes an integrative theoretical framework — the Equal-Alternative Narrative (EAN) model — that synthesises insights from social and personality psychology, psychological anthropology, identity fusion theory, positioning theory, and clinical practice into a unified account of vulnerability to violent extremism. A key premise is that ideology is better understood as a shared cultural medium of symbols, stories, and roles through which identity is organised rather than as a separable belief system. In turn, the model sees that vulnerability to extremist recruitment stems from the erosion of what we term identity optionality — the range and accessibility of viable identity narratives available to an individual. This optionality is conceptualised as a dynamic spectrum from a state in which a single interpretive framework monopolises the individual's narrative space, to one of fluid regeneration across multiple configurations. Given the growing evidence that counter-narrative strategies produce limited or inconsistent effects, the paper introduces the EAN approach as a prevention and intervention strategy. Rather than relying on directly countering extremist narratives, EAN focuses on fulfilling emotional and psychological needs, recognising susceptibilities, and restoring identity optionality. Applications include educational expansion at the primary level, needs-based intervention at the secondary level, and therapeutic identity restoration at the tertiary level. The framework's operationalisation is set out across four sub-sections — design logic, implementation stages, prevention-level mechanisms, and connections to existing practitioner frameworks (the Phoenix Model of disengagement and the ABC Model of programme design). Convergent evidence from the UK's Healthy Identity Intervention — whose finding of behavioural disengagement without ideological disillusionment aligns with EAN predictions — is treated as independent validation. We also suggest that focusing on markers of identity optionality erosion, rather than ideological content, may enhance predictive capabilities through existing text-based models. The framework identifies constrained optionality as a widespread, structurally produced latent vulnerability across populations, with implications for understanding both acute radicalisation and informing primary prevention. Keywords: Identity Optionality, Deradicalisation, Equal-Alternative Narratives, Needs-Based Intervention

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Introduction

The study of terrorism and counter-terrorism has long grappled with understanding the pathways individuals take towards violent extremism. A dominant paradigm has focused on the concept of 'radicalisation,' often understood as the adoption of an extremist ideology that

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precedes and directly motivates violent action (Schuurman & Taylor, 2018). Consequently, work on countering violent extremism (CVE) and on preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has heavily relied on Counter Narrative (CN) strategies aimed at debunking or challenging extremist ideologies. However, the efficacy of this ideology-centric approach has been questioned by scholars and practitioners alike (Schuurman & Taylor, 2018; Coppock & McGovern, 2014). John Horgan's 2013 assertion that "Nobody watches YouTube or reads Inspire and becomes a terrorist. It's absurd to think so" highlights a persistent scepticism regarding the simplistic causal link between exposure to ideology and engagement in terrorism (Knefel, 2013). Recent research increasingly supports this scepticism, pointing towards identity dynamics, psychological vulnerabilities, social contexts, and personal grievances as more proximate drivers (Ebner et al., 2022; Akrami et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2020), suggesting that extremist ideologies may often serve as 'downstream' justifications for individuals already seeking belonging, status, or solutions to personal crises rather than the primary drivers themselves.

This paper argues for an extended critical re-evaluation of this paradigm. We propose a shift in focus towards understanding the erosion of what we term identity optionality — the range of viable identity narratives, social roles, and need-fulfilment pathways available to an individual, together with the psychological capacity to perceive and move between them — as a key vulnerability. Drawing on personality and social psychology, psychological anthropology, identity fusion theory, and clinical practice, we argue that ideology is often better understood not as an external doctrine but as an expression of underlying personality needs and identity conflicts, and that even prosocial forms of identity commitment can constitute structural vulnerability when they shut down the capacity for flexible identity reconfiguration.

Rather than treating structural conditions — political grievances, discrimination, historical legacies of colonialism — and psychological mechanisms as separate domains, we adopt the anthropological position that structural inequalities become internalised into identity formations and the organisation of personality itself (Gregg, 1998; Quinn, 2006). Our focus on psychological mechanisms therefore does not displace structural analysis but examines the level at which structural factors exert their effects. We acknowledge that CVE frameworks have been critiqued as extending securitisation and conflating dissent with danger (Kundnani,

2012; Heath-Kelly, 2013); and we position the EAN approach as one which aims to expand rather than constrain identity options.

Recent theoretical work is converging on this integrated logic. Koehler (2024) demonstrates that perceived relative deprivation — a fundamentally structural condition — functions as a validated risk factor in radicalisation processes because the gap between expected and attainable values (welfare, power, status, belonging) is the relative deprivation Gurr (1970) linked to the impetus to political violence, opening individuals to ideological frameworks that promise to restore what has been lost. Koehler's framework, which positions deprivation as creating the motivational opening that ideology then channels, reinforces the case for interventions that address the value gaps generating vulnerability, not merely the ideological content through which that vulnerability is expressed. Building on this reconceptualisation, we introduce the Equal-Alternative Narrative (EAN) approach. Unlike counter-narratives, which assume ideology is the root cause, EAN operates from the premise that unmet psychological and emotional needs are the core vulnerability and focuses on providing alternative, non-extremist pathways to fulfil those needs and restore identity optionality.

Terminology requires brief clarification before we proceed. Following Briggs and Feve's (2013) tripartite counter-messaging spectrum — adopted by Holbrook and Horgan (2019) and now widely used in CVE programme design — we distinguish three categories. Counter Narratives (CNs) directly challenge or debunk extremist ideological claims and are typically deployed as broad campaigns. Alternative Narratives (ANs) offer different perspectives or values without directly confronting extremist content and are more commonly used in one-to-one or small-group counselling work. Equal Alternative Narratives (EANs), our proposed sub-category, are distinguished from generic alternative narratives by the requirement of functional equivalence: an EAN must address the same underlying psychological need (belonging, significance, agency) that the extremist narrative fulfils, but through constructive channels. EANs are not counter-narratives — they do not directly challenge ideological content — and they are not generic alternative narratives, because they are produced through systematic needs assessment and functional matching rather than through general value-substitution. This distinction is central to the argument that follows: the failures recurrent in CN evaluations (Carthy et al., 2020; Treacy et al., 2024) do not warrant

pessimism about narrative-level intervention as such, only about narrative interventions that operate as content-attack rather than as identity-option expansion.

A note on aims, scope, and positionality. The paper's primary aim is theoretical: to propose an integrative framework that synthesises existing insights into a unified mechanism-level account of vulnerability and intervention, organised around identity optionality. The framework is, however, designed to be operationally generative — producing specific testable predictions and informing intervention design in ways developed in the *From Theory to Practice: Operationalising the EAN Model* Section below. The model has been developed at the intersection of academic research and applied practice: the authors conduct academic research on identity processes and disinformation while also engaging in applied P/CVE work — discourse analysis, narrative-design methodology, and identity literacy curriculum work — in partnership with educational, governmental, and civil society organisations. The paper therefore draws on both theoretical synthesis and practical experience, and is intended to speak to both academic and practitioner audiences.

Deconstructing the Radicalisation Paradigm: A Critique of Ideology-Centric Models

To build the case for an integrative theoretical approach, it is first necessary to identify the conceptual and empirical limitations of the dominant 'radicalisation' paradigm. Counter-terrorism initiatives are commonly framed within a public health model: primary (societal prevention), secondary (early-stage intervention), and tertiary (post-conviction rehabilitation) (Hall, Kenyon & Carter, 2025). The 'radicalisation' concept has influenced strategies at all levels, conceptualised as a linear process leading individuals towards violence through the adoption of extremist beliefs (Schuurman & Taylor, 2018; Silber & Bhatt, 2007; Post, 2007; Sageman, 2014). This framing heavily shaped programmes like the UK's Prevent strategy (HM Government, 2011), with its reliance on 'Counter Narratives' designed to debunk extremist ideological tenets (Coppock & McGovern, 2014).

Despite its prominence, this ideology-centric model has faced significant criticism. The definition of 'radicalisation' remains vague, often conflating non-violent radicalism with violent extremism (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Schuurman & Taylor, 2018), while concepts like staged radicalisation processes (Silber & Bhatt, 2007) or 'cognitive openings' (Wiktorowicz,

2005) lacked robust empirical validation (Sageman, 2014). More fundamentally, the assumed causal link between adopting radical beliefs and engaging in terrorism is empirically weak. Most individuals holding radical beliefs never become terrorists, highlighting a critical 'specificity gap' (Schuurman & Taylor, 2018), and involvement often stems from bottom-up processes based on pre-existing social bonds and personal crises rather than top-down ideological recruitment (Sageman, 2014; Horgan, 2008; Bartlett & Miller, 2012). As Koehler (2025) has recently argued, terrorism research has treated ideology in binary and narrow terms as a doctrinal belief system, neglecting richer insights from political psychology and philosophy; P/CVE practice has consequently operated with an under-theorised understanding of how ideology actually functions in radicalisation processes (a gap Koehler addresses through morphological analysis of ideological structure). Brown et al. (2024), analysing over 119,000 social media posts from individuals who mobilised to right-wing extremist action versus those who held similar views but did not, found that communicating ideological or hateful content was not related to mobilisation — instead, mobilisation correlated with operational indicators. These findings reinforce Koehler's (2014) insight that radicalisation operates through 'depluralization': a narrowing of the individual's perceived range of political concepts, values, and identity options, rather than the simple adoption of an ideology.

A growing consensus in the field has been moving away from both the maximalist "ideology causes terrorism" position and the eliminativist "ideology is irrelevant" position toward a non-binary, mechanism-level account. On this account, ideology functions as the cultural-semiotic medium — the shared symbols, stories, and roles a culture makes available for constructing identity — through which identity is organised. Holbrook and Horgan (2019) provide the clearest articulation: ideology should be understood as "fluid, not rigid, and not something that either 'does or does not' impact individuals" (p. 3) and as "fundamentally part of the environment, affecting all who participate and their perceptions of what they encounter" (p. 10). Their analysis identifies three standard arguments against ideology's relevance — the cognition argument (terrorists lack doctrinal knowledge), the causation argument (other variables outweigh ideology), and the exposure argument (most exposed to extremist content do not radicalise) — and shows that all three dissolve once ideology is reconceptualised as a fluid organising medium rather than a fixed belief system. This provides empirical scaffolding for the position we develop here.

This convergence is also visible in an exchange between Dawson and Schuurman. Dawson (2021a) explicitly argues that religiosity may play "an operative and mediating role, organizing relatively inchoate feelings and thoughts and linking them to specific actions" (p. 6) — a formulation closely paralleling the account of ideology as cultural-semiotic organising medium that we develop below. Schuurman (2021), responding, partially concedes the point and reframes his earlier position not as dismissing ideology but as arguing for its contextualisation: extremist beliefs are, on his account, necessary but insufficient. Both positions agree on ideology's motivational centrality and disagree only on its sufficiency — a gap that an organising-medium account fills.

Our position should not be conflated with the "explanatory split" between cognitive and behavioural radicalisation that Peels (2025) has rightly criticised. Belief and ideology are explanatorily relevant to involvement in extremism. Our claim is more specific: the explanatory work ideology does is organisational and semiotic — structuring the identity options available to individuals and groups — rather than acting as a direct propositional cause of behaviour. Counter-narratives fail not because beliefs are irrelevant (Peels rebuts that view) but because they treat beliefs as targets to be replaced rather than as organising frameworks that need expansion. Peels' own move from individual belief-attribution toward collective and social-epistemic explanation is structurally compatible with the organising-medium account.

If ideology is not the primary driver for many, then counter-narratives face a fundamental problem: they presuppose a degree of identity optionality — the ability to critically engage with and choose between narratives — which may be precisely what is lacking in susceptible individuals (Cf. Adler, 2012; Bamberg & Wipff, 2020). This is compounded by lone actors who adopt an 'ideology à la carte' approach, fusing contradictory sources into personalised justifications (Pascarelli, 2016). Empirically, Carthy et al.'s (2020) systematic review found counter-narrative interventions showed only a small effect on secondary risk factors, with a lack of evidence for effectiveness on primary outcomes such as intent to act violently; Treacy, Reed, and Glazzard's (2024) subsequent systematic review of live counter-messaging campaigns confirmed that evidence supporting their effectiveness remains limited. Reasons for disengagement are similarly diverse and often unrelated to ideological shifts (Bjørgo & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009), and many existing programmes

lack rigorous evaluation (Sageman, 2014; Sydes et al., 2023; Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2025), with measuring success complicated by the difficulty of distinguishing genuine change from superficial compliance (Hall, Kenyon & Carter, 2025; Silke & Morrison, 2020). These limitations suggest a need to move beyond linear models of radicalisation and purely ideology-focused interventions, towards a deeper understanding of the interplay between identity, psychological needs, and social dynamics — viewing ideology as a potential vehicle for expressing underlying issues rather than the sole cause.

A Theoretical Framework: Identity, Identity Optionality, and the Equal-Alternative Narrative (EAN) Model

Having established the limitations of existing ideology-centric models, this section introduces the core tenets of our proposed theoretical framework: the Equal-Alternative Narrative (EAN) model. This framework synthesises insights from social and personality psychology, psychological anthropology, identity fusion theory, and clinical practice to examine how identity processes, rather than ideology alone, shape the trajectory towards violence justified by extremist causes. Its central contribution is not any single insight — many of the component arguments have been made individually in the literature — but rather the integration of these insights into a unified account organised around a single construct: identity optionality.

We define identity optionality as the range and accessibility of viable identity narratives, social roles, and need-fulfilment pathways available to an individual within their psychological and socio-structural context. It encompasses both an external dimension — whether alternative identity positions genuinely exist and are practically accessible — and an internal dimension — whether the individual retains the psychological capacity to perceive, evaluate, and move between them. We use the terms identity optionality, narrative agency, and identity agency to refer to this same integrated construct: the degree to which an individual can author and navigate their own identity across multiple available positions. Radicalisation, on this account, is a process that erodes identity optionality from both directions simultaneously — narrowing the external narrative environment while degrading

the internal capacity to seek alternatives — and effective intervention must restore it in both dimensions.

This definition distinguishes identity optionality from adjacent constructs in the literature. Koehler's (2014) depluralization captures the external narrowing of identity positions but not the internal capacity to perceive alternatives. Cognitive flexibility (Jugl, 2022) addresses the internal capacity for perspective-taking but not the structural availability of identity options. Self-efficacy (Cherney & Koehler, 2023) concerns the perceived ability to enact change but not the range of options available. Identity optionality integrates both dimensions — external availability and internal capacity — and it is the interaction between them that provides the construct's explanatory frame. To develop this perspective, we draw on insights from social and personality psychology alongside psychological anthropology.

Reconceptualising Identity and Ideology

Traditional approaches in political science and terrorism studies often treat ideology as a distinct set of political beliefs existing externally to the individual, which then acts upon them through processes like radicalisation (Schuurman & Taylor, 2018). However, perspectives from personality psychology and psychological anthropology offer a fundamentally different view: ideology is not separable from identity but is intrinsic to how personality organises itself around available cultural materials.

Consider an individual experiencing a persistent embodied tension organised around social position — felt as anxiety, vulnerability, and a need for recognition. The same underlying tension can be organised through very different identity expressions, each drawing on different culturally available materials: religious piety (where the tension is interpreted as spiritual yearning and resolved through devotional practice and community), nationalist activism (where it is interpreted as defending the in-group's status and resolved through political mobilisation), or local community service (where it is interpreted as a need to be useful and resolved through embedded volunteering). The bodily tension is the same in each case; what differs is the cultural materials available, accessible, and credible to the individual for organising it. Where no constructive frameworks are available, the same tension may be organised into grievance against an out-group — not because the individual has adopted a grievance ideology, but because grievance has been the only vehicle on offer.

Gregg (1998) provides the theoretical architecture for this distinction, terming the underlying embodied experience the genotypic personality — the somatic, affective, and kinesthetic tensions that constitute the individual's embodied experience prior to interpretation — and its culturally organised expression the phenotypic personality: the self-representational system through which those tensions are organised, interpreted, and expressed using the symbols, narratives, and roles a culture makes available. Identity and ideology, on this account, are not distinct categories but aspects of a single process: the individual's ongoing negotiation between internal embodied experience and the shared cultural symbols, stories, and roles available for organising it. Quinn (2006) extends this, showing how cultural models — shared schemas for understanding the world — provide the repertoire from which individuals construct and express identity positions. The individual does not simply adopt an ideology; rather, ideology is the cultural medium through which personality expresses, manages, and makes sense of its own internal dynamics. Identity optionality, on this account, is the range of culturally viable identity expressions — what Gregg calls phenotypic configurations — an individual can plausibly inhabit.

This has a crucial implication. If personality is, as Gregg (1998) puts it, "culture writ small" (p.125) — the individual-level instantiation of broader cultural patterns — then the critical question is not whether someone holds particular ideological beliefs, but rather what psychological needs those beliefs serve and how many alternative identity configurations the individual can access. A healthy identity system maintains what Gregg terms the capacity for "quantum shifts" (p.130): discrete, wholesale reconfigurations of self-representation that allow the individual to move fluidly between different identity positions in response to changing contexts and needs. What matters, from both a clinical and a security perspective, is whether this capacity for flexible reconfiguration is maintained or degraded.

Identity Optionality as a Dynamic Spectrum

We propose that identity optionality — the range and accessibility of viable identity configurations — exists not as a binary state but as a continuous spectrum. At one extreme lies fixed semiotic stasis: the complete monopolisation of the individual’s narrative space by a single interpretive framework which forces a single configuration of personality, rendering them unable to perform internal identity shifts even when circumstances change. At the other

lies fluid optionality: the capacity to move between multiple identity configurations, each coherent and psychologically real, responsive to context and need. Most people occupy the middle ranges, moving across this spectrum throughout their lives. Grief, trauma, or relationship loss may temporarily contract optionality, making simplified narratives temporarily attractive as they express diminished inner states. Recovery, meaningful connection, or new experiences expand it again. This dynamism is not pathological — it is the natural rhythm of human development and meaning-making.

This spectrum framing is critical for two reasons. First, it avoids pathologising normal human experience: temporary contraction of optionality during crisis is universal and does not in itself constitute a risk factor. What distinguishes vulnerability from resilience is not whether an individual experiences contraction, but whether they retain the internal and external resources to expand again. Second, it explains why violent extremism is rare even among populations exposed to extremist messaging: sustained occupation of the fixed-stasis extreme requires the convergence of multiple contracting forces — structural, relational, psychological — that simultaneously erode both external options and internal capacity. Violent extremism represents one of the few sustained positions at the extreme end of this spectrum, which is itself diagnostically significant.

Koehler (2014) captures the process by which optionality is eroded in his concept of depluralization: radicalisation understood as a narrowing of political concepts and values according to the definitions employed by a specific ideology. As Koehler (2017) argues, violent radical ideologies set out to eliminate or negate alternative or competing definitions of the ideology's core values and concepts — attempting to monopolize the ideological repertoire. This monopolisation of narrative space — the progressive elimination of competing frameworks for interpreting experience — is the external mechanism through which identity optionality is degraded. Conversely, deradicalisation involves repluralization: an increased perception of alternative options that reintroduces complexity and contestability into the individual's core concepts (Koehler, 2017). The EAN model extends Koehler's insight by providing a theoretical architecture for understanding why monopolisation is psychologically effective and why repluralization works at the level of behaviour change. It sees that monopolization's diminishment of socio-political concepts simultaneously reduces

identity optionality — the underlying variable that determines the individual's capacity to perceive and inhabit alternative identity configurations.

Koehler's (2021) later analysis of side-switching — extremists who migrate between ideologically hostile milieus — provides a revealing test case for this conceptualisation. Side-switchers display remarkable ideological flexibility, moving between hostile belief systems while retaining underlying psychological patterns and needs (significance-seeking, oppositional agency, belonging). Koehler himself draws the lesson that ideology matters: the specific morphological features of ideologies — shared concepts like anti-Semitism or anti-imperialism that function as "ideological highways" — constrain which transitions are structurally possible (Koehler, 2021, pp. 210–215). This is fully consistent with the EAN framework's anthropological position: ideology matters precisely because it is the semiotic layer through which personality organises itself (Gregg, 1998; Quinn, 2006). The cultural-semiotic materials available shape which identity configurations are accessible. Restoring identity optionality therefore requires engaging at this semiotic level — not to counter existing ideological content through argumentation, but to expand the repertoire of organising frameworks through which the individual can configure a viable identity.

Identity Fusion: Mechanism, Not Pathology

Identity Fusion theory illuminates the link between personality organisation and cultural-narrative commitment. Fusion describes a visceral sense of oneness with a group where personal and social identities become synergistically merged, making threats to the group feel like threats to the personal self (Swann et al., 2009; Swann & Buhrmester, 2015). A recent meta-analysis confirmed that identity fusion is the strongest predictor of radical pro-group intentions across studies, outpredicting ideological commitment (Varmann et al., 2023), reinforcing the argument that identity dynamics represent the more proximate risk factor. Comprehensive Identity Fusion Theory (CIFT) has extended the construct beyond group fusion to encompass fusion with values, ideologies, and causes (Swann, Klein, & Gómez, 2024), further supporting the view that ideology functions as an identity phenomenon rather than a separable belief system. The "fusion-plus-threat" model posits that high fusion combined with perceived existential threat significantly increases the likelihood of violent self-sacrifice (Whitehouse, 2018), and linguistic evidence supports this: proxies for fusion

(kinship language such as "brothers," "sisters," "our blood") combined with threat narratives were prevalent in violent manifestos but absent in non-violent ones (Ebner et al., 2022). Feldt's (2026) work on narrativity and emotionality as drivers of sustained devotion in religious extremism offers compatible support for understanding why fusion-organised identity is so resistant to direct argumentation: the affective and narrative weight of the configuration cannot be matched by content-level rebuttal.

However, it is essential to recognise that fusion is a mechanism of psychological intensity, not an inherently pathological state. Recent research demonstrates that identity fusion can foster intergroup trust and cooperation when contextual conditions are favourable. Klein, Greenaway, and Bastian (2024) found across five studies that fusion was consistently associated with outgroup trust and social exploration when threat was not salient, providing evidence for the "fusion-secure base hypothesis" — the proposition that strong ingroup commitment can empower individuals to engage positively with outgroups (Klein & Bastian, 2023). Klein et al. (2025) replicated these findings in conflict-affected contexts including the Philippines, Gambia, Pakistan, Tanzania, and Uganda, demonstrating that fusion predicted willingness to cooperate with outgroups when intergroup perceptions were positive.

These findings carry important implications for the EAN framework. First, they confirm that fusion itself is not the appropriate intervention target. What determines whether fusion leads to violence or cooperation is the broader identity context: the availability of diverse intragroup and positive intergroup alternatives, the presence or absence of threat narratives, and — crucially — the degree of identity optionality the individual retains. Second, and more subtly, even prosocial fusion represents a sub-optimal identity state from the perspective of the optionality framework. A person deeply fused to a peace-building organisation or a prosocial cause has gained a positive orientation but has not necessarily recovered the capacity for adaptive identity shifts — the ability to move fluidly between multiple identity configurations. They remain locked in a single high-intensity configuration, which means they remain structurally vulnerable. If an external agent can construct a credible threat narrative targeting that fused commitment, the same intensity that currently drives cooperation can be redirected toward conflict. This vulnerability mechanism helps explain why individuals across the full ideological spectrum — from committed progressives to ardent nationalists — can become susceptible to conspiracy theories and disinformation:

ideological consistency maintained at high intensity, regardless of its content, signals a fused state that provides exploitable attack vectors for recruiters, propagandists, and disinformation agents alike.

The implication is that effective intervention aims not at redirecting fusion toward prosocial targets but at restoring the generative capacity for flexible identity reconfiguration. Observable phenomena such as fusion and Zmigrod's (2022) cognitive rigidity — the measurable difficulty in updating mental models that correlates with ideological extremes — are best understood as outcomes of identity optionality erosion rather than as primary causal variables. This reframes the intervention target: rather than attempting to reduce fusion or increase cognitive flexibility directly, interventions should restore the identity optionality from which flexibility naturally follows.

Positioning, Vulnerability, and the Roots of Optionality Erosion

If identity optionality exists on a spectrum, and most people fluctuate across it throughout their lives, then a critical question arises: what determines baseline optionality? Positioning theory (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991) offers a powerful explanatory framework. Individuals are continuously positioned by social discourse — by family narratives, cultural scripts, institutional roles, and the taken-for-granted assumptions of their social environment. Much of this positioning is invisible to the individual: a person raised within a single cultural repertoire, whose parents, community, and institutions have consistently reinforced a particular set of identity configurations, may be entirely confident in who they are while possessing very limited capacity to imagine alternative ways of being. They have been positioned into a constrained identity space without recognising the constraint. McGregor's (2026) account of reactive extremism — in which anxious uncertainty narrows the available stance and triggers compensatory conviction through reactive approach motivation — operates through a mechanistically convergent pathway: when the perceived range of viable identity options contracts under threat or uncertainty, defensive over-commitment to the remaining options is the predictable response.

This suggests that a significant proportion of any population exists in what might be termed a semi-fused baseline state: not acutely at risk, but possessing limited optionality that constitutes a latent vulnerability. Such individuals have not developed the metacognitive

capacity to recognise their own positioning as contingent — as one configuration among many possible ones — because their social environment has never presented alternatives as psychologically real options. This is not a clinical condition but a structural one, produced by educational and cultural systems that typically privilege a single cultural repertoire over exposure to multiple frameworks for organising experience and identity.

This latent vulnerability has significant implications for understanding why propaganda, disinformation, and extremist recruitment operate effectively at scale. Mass populations are not suddenly radicalised by exposure to extremist content; rather, individuals already in constrained-optionality states — who have never developed the capacity to evaluate competing identity frameworks critically — are susceptible to narrative monopolisation when circumstances (economic disruption, social upheaval, perceived threat) contract their already-limited optionality further.

It follows that educational approaches that expand identity optionality from childhood represent a potentially powerful form of primary prevention. Bruner's (1966) Man: A Course of Study (MACOS) curriculum provides a compelling historical example: by immersing American schoolchildren in Netsilik Inuit culture — not as anthropological curiosity but as a lived alternative framework for organising fundamental human questions of kinship, ritual, cosmology, and social purpose — the curriculum aimed to develop what the EAN framework would term identity optionality. The pedagogical objective was not to replace the child's home culture but to expand their generative capacity: the ability to recognise their own cultural framework as one among many coherent possibilities for being human, thereby developing the metacognitive resources to resist narrative monopolisation.

More broadly, approaches grounded in cultural semiotic analysis — mapping the specific symbolic systems, narrative structures, and identity configurations available within a given population — can directly inform EAN intervention design. By identifying which semiotic resources are available, which are constrained, and which could be introduced or expanded, practitioners can develop culturally resonant alternative narratives that genuinely broaden identity optionality rather than merely substituting one monopolising narrative for another. This approach engages directly with the ideological layer — not because ideology causes identity pathology, but because it is the semiotic medium through which personality is organised and through which depluralized identity can be re-expanded. Intervention operates

on ideology as a vector for change, employing the visible cultural-symbolic repertoire to restore flexibility at the deeper agentic-identity level. In this sense, the EAN model reframes rather than resolves the persistent debate over whether ideology 'matters' in radicalisation: ideology is central to intervention precisely because it is the organising structure of identity, while remaining secondary as a causal explanation for why individuals become vulnerable in the first place.

Again, this reconceptualisation shifts the focus from viewing ideology as the primary pathology to understanding it as a symptom or expression of underlying identity processes and unmet needs. Social identification with a group can manifest linguistically through conformity to both group-specific vernacular and distinct patterns of function word use (Smith et al., 2020), and fusion through specific markers like kinship metaphors (Ebner et al., 2022). Both findings suggest that interventions should target the deeper identity dynamics — the optionality spectrum — rather than solely focusing on surface-level ideological content. Sobkowicz's (2023) work on opinion dynamics, which models the complex interplay of factors beyond simple ideological agreement, further supports the need for models that account for this deeper complexity.

Structure, Culture, and the Internalisation of Inequality

A common objection to psychological approaches in extremism research is that they individualise what are fundamentally political problems, treating as personal pathology what are in fact rational responses to structural injustice (Kundnani, 2012). This critique warrants serious engagement. However, it rests on a false dichotomy between structural and psychological levels of analysis. Structural inequalities do not exist merely as external conditions that individuals respond to; rather, they become internalised into the very formation of identity and organisation of personality.

This perspective resolves what appears to be a tension between structural and psychological analysis. When we examine identity dynamics, narrative agency, and psychological needs, we are not turning away from structural factors but rather investigating how those factors operate at the level where they actually shape human somatic and cognitive experience and action. Discrimination is not merely an external event that happens to individuals; it becomes part of how identity is constructed, constrained, and defended.

Political grievances about foreign policy are not simply opinions held about distant events; they become woven into narratives of group victimization, personal significance, and moral identity. Colonial legacies do not exist only in history books; they persist in contemporary identity formations, shaping who can claim what identities, under what conditions, and with what social consequences.

This approach offers analytical advantages for understanding extremism across diverse contexts. Rather than developing separate theories for each cultural or political setting — an approach that risks both cultural essentialism and theoretical fragmentation — we can examine the universal psychological processes through which contextually variable structural factors become internalised. The needs for belonging, significance, identity coherence, and relief from existential threat are human universals (Kruglanski et al., 2022); what varies across contexts is how these needs are fulfilled or frustrated, and what narratives and identity options are culturally available for addressing them. A young British Muslim facing Islamophobia, a rural American experiencing economic dislocation, and a marginalised individual anywhere confronting systematic exclusion may internalise their structural circumstances into different specific identity configurations — but the underlying psychological mechanisms linking structural marginalisation to identity crisis to vulnerability to rigid narratives exhibit recognisable patterns.

Critically, this framework avoids the trap of treating extremist affiliation as inherently irrational or pathological. Political grievances may be entirely legitimate; experiences of discrimination may reflect actual systemic injustice; perceptions of threat may be grounded in real patterns of violence or exclusion. The question is not whether these structural realities exist—they demonstrably do—but rather why, given similar structural conditions, some individuals develop extremist affiliations or engage in violence while others pursue constructive political engagement, community organizing, or other responses. It is at this juncture that identity dynamics and identity optionality become crucial. By seeing identity optionality as a root cause, the EAN framework does not ask individuals to abandon legitimate grievances or deny structural realities; rather, it seeks to expand the range of narrative pathways available for responding to those realities, moving beyond the false choice between acquiescence and violence.

Factors Contributing to Identity Pathology and the Erosion of Identity Optionality

If extremist ideologies often serve as expressions of underlying identity needs, what factors contribute to the development of these vulnerabilities? We contend that a common thread across many identified risk factors is the erosion of identity optionality - a form of identity pathology. Importantly, identity pathology is not merely a metaphor: integrative reviews demonstrate that biological mechanisms interact with behavioural processes to produce measurable identity disturbance (Kaufman & Crowell, 2018). Numerous interdependent factors can contribute:

Practitioners identify vulnerabilities spanning personal factors (isolation, low self-esteem, perceived injustice, identity confusion), family factors (conflict, rejection), and social factors (rejection by peers, exposure to propaganda, need for status) — often pointing to unmet needs for belonging, meaning, or justice (Wolfowicz et al., 2020; Safer Oxfordshire Partnership, n.d.) and representing potential significance loss (Kruglanski et al., 2022). Experiences of trauma or prejudice can profoundly disrupt an individual's sense of self, leading them to seek explanation in extremist frameworks that validate victimhood or offer retribution (Klimstra & Denissen, 2017; Ebner et al., 2022). Tietjen's (2023) analysis highlights the role of fear — of outgroup dissent, ingroup dissent, and inner ambiguity — in driving adherence to rigid value systems, indicating a profound loss of internal narrative control.

While research indicates no direct causal link between mental illness and terrorism (Al-Attar, 2019; Corner & Gill, 2017), specific features associated with conditions such as ASD or personality disorders can interact with contextual factors to shape susceptibility, particularly through social marginalisation, cognitive rigidity, or heightened online vulnerability (Woodbury-Smith et al., 2022; Broyd et al., 2023). An individualised case formulation approach is essential (Al-Attar, 2019).

Even when individuals develop motivations to disengage, their capacity to act can be severely constrained. Cherney and Koehler (2023) highlight both internal constraints (poor self-efficacy, difficulty with self-reflection) and external ones (social stigma, limited access to alternatives, ongoing group influence). This gap between motivation and capacity perpetuates entrapment, constraining identity optionality on both dimensions.

These diverse factors converge on the erosion of identity optionality, creating the conditions upon which extremist groups can recruit, offering fulfilment of core needs where the individual feels unable to generate these through other pathways.

The Equal-Alternative Narrative (EAN) Approach

Given these limitations and the understanding that extremist alignment stems from eroded identity optionality and unmet needs, we propose the Equal-Alternative Narrative (EAN) approach. Counter-narratives, when directly challenging adopted beliefs, attack the very structure the individual relies upon to meet psychological needs (Kruglanski et al., 2022). For someone in a state of identity fusion, these challenges are perceived as threats, strengthening resolve rather than facilitating change (Swann et al., 2009; Tietjen, 2023). Furthermore, counter-narratives often misjudge the target's level of ideological commitment: for many, allegiance is built on basic in-group/out-group dynamics and perceived victimisation, not sophisticated doctrine. Interventions that assume the individual possesses the identity optionality required to choose between competing narratives are likely to be ineffective (Cf. Adler, 2012; Bamberg & Wipff, 2020; Carthy et al., 2020).

The EAN approach shifts focus from challenging ideological narratives to addressing underlying needs — significance (Kruglanski et al., 2022), fear relief, belonging — that the extremist narrative purports to fulfil. It seeks not to counter the extremist narrative directly but to compete with it by providing alternative, pro-social means to achieve similar psychological ends.

The 'equal' in EAN requires clarification. We use 'equal' to denote functional equivalence, not absolute parity of intensity. The alternative need not replicate the specific experience of extremist affiliation; rather, it must fulfil the same underlying function through a genuinely viable pathway. What makes an alternative 'equal' is that it addresses the same need with sufficient credibility and accessibility that the individual can inhabit it as a real identity position. This is consistent with Kruglanski et al.'s (2022) argument that significance can be restored through diverse means: the alternative pathway need not duplicate the felt intensity of extremist affiliation, but must address the same underlying need at a level the individual can take up.

A suggestive parallel from clinical practice reinforces this logic. Coherence Therapy posits that lasting change requires not merely suppressing an old schema but providing an alternative that renders it unnecessary (Ecker et al., 2012). More broadly, psychotherapy research demonstrates that restoring narrative agency is itself therapeutic: increases in clients' narrative expression of agency significantly predicted subsequent improvements in mental health (Adler, 2012), and Thomsen, Cowan, and McAdams (2025) demonstrate that narrative transformation functions as both a marker and mechanism of psychological change.

An EAN intervention would first assess the specific needs, grievances, and identity conflicts driving susceptibility, then focus on co-creating alternative narratives and opportunities offering different ways to achieve belonging, status, purpose, constructive grievance resolution, positive identity, and coping mechanisms for anxiety or uncertainty (See Tietjen, 2023; Jugl, 2022). This logic parallels the Good Lives Model (GLM) of offender rehabilitation (Ward & Stewart, 2003), which focuses on developing capabilities for achieving primary human goods through prosocial means, suggesting that needs-based intervention logic has independent theoretical support across CVE and criminological rehabilitation literature. Effective implementation requires deep understanding of individual context and may include mentoring, education, positive social groups, mental health support, or channels for constructive civic engagement. Sobkowicz's (2023) modelling further supports the principle that fostering diverse connections, rather than direct confrontation, leads to more stable outcomes.

From Theory to Practice: Operationalising the EAN Model

The framework developed above carries direct implications for intervention design. Effective CVE programmes require an articulated theory of change linking proposed activities to mechanisms of effect, and the absence of such mechanism-level specification has been identified repeatedly as a weakness in the field's evaluation landscape (Marsden, Lewis & Knott, 2019; Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2025). The sections below set out what an EAN-informed intervention would look like operationally, as a set of theoretical-architectural commitments derivable from the framework rather than as a prescription for any particular tool: the design logic, the implementation logic, the prevention-level adaptations, and the connections to existing practitioner frameworks.

Identity-Optionality Expansion as the Core Design Logic

What an EAN-informed intervention does operationally — at any prevention level — follows directly from the theoretical argument. Rather than contesting the propositional content of an extremist narrative, an EAN-informed intervention works to expand the identity options available to the individual so that the extremist narrative is no longer the only viable framework for organising experience and meeting needs. The substantive design commitments are threefold.

First, direct attack on identity-intertwined narrative material backfires, because the attacked content is being used to organise identity (Swann et al., 2009; Tietjen, 2023). EAN-informed intervention sidesteps this by offering equally compelling pro-social alternatives that satisfy the same underlying psychological needs — belonging, purpose, dignity, significance — that the extremist narrative exploits.

Second, the mechanism of change is the expansion of viable identity configurations, enabling individuals to maintain a secure sense of self without needing to defend rigid positions against perceived threats. The therapeutic literature provides convergent support: lasting behavioural change consistently requires alternative schemas that render existing ones unnecessary, not the suppression of existing ones (Ecker et al., 2012; Adler, 2012; Thomsen, Cowan, & McAdams, 2025).

Third, expansion must operate on both dimensions of identity optionality: the external dimension (making alternatives genuinely available within the individual's social and informational ecosystem) and the internal dimension (building the metacognitive capacity to recognise one's own positioning as contingent — as one configuration among many possible ones). Interventions that work on only one dimension typically fail; addressing the external dimension without the internal capacity produces externally available alternatives that the individual cannot psychologically inhabit, while addressing the internal capacity without external availability produces metacognitive insight without anywhere to go.

The Implementation Logic of an EAN Intervention

Translating these design commitments into a structured implementation process, an EAN-informed intervention would proceed through approximately the following stages, each derivable from the theoretical framework:

1. Analyse the narrative environment. Map the identity constructions being activated by the extremist narrative, the us/them dynamics, and the specific psychological needs being exploited. This is a diagnostic stage in the sense that Holbrook and Horgan (2019) anchor in Snow and Benford's (1988) frame typology — the diagnostic frame must be understood before any prognostic alternative can be offered. 2. Define the target audience in identity terms. Develop audience profiles documenting the relevant identity layers, the psychological needs in play, and the existing stories, symbols, and roles individuals draw on to construct identity. Generic audience segmentation will not suffice; the relevant variation is at the level of identity organisation and need-fulfilment, not demography. 3. Develop functionally equivalent alternative narratives. Identify positive values and identity expressions that can be amplified; locate the functional equivalences that meet the same underlying needs through non-divisive channels. This is the central design move of the EAN approach: the alternative is not merely different but functionally equivalent in the precise sense that it addresses the same need. 4. Identify credible voices and channels. Map trusted community voices and communication channels within (not external to) the target community. External voices typically lack the credibility required to reach individuals whose identity options are already constrained — a recurring failure mode in state-led counter-messaging (Marsden, Lewis & Knott, 2019, pp. 8–9). 5. Craft the narrative content. Develop messages with cultural depth, drawing on references from history, literature, and popular culture that resonate with the target audience's existing identity repertoire rather than imposing external frames. 6. Design strategically for subtlety. An EAN must not read as propaganda or counter-messaging; the intent is to expand the available repertoire, not to substitute one prescribed narrative for another. This distinguishes EAN from both counter-narrative campaigns and from many alternative-narrative interventions in the Briggs and Feve (2013) taxonomy. 7. Embed ethical review and community feedback. Ensure that 'expanding identity options' remains exactly that, rather than becoming a more sophisticated form of the prescriptive intervention EAN was designed to displace.

The mechanism of change at each stage is explicit: expanding the semiotic repertoire available for identity construction (Stages 1–3), ensuring credibility and accessibility of alternatives (Stages 4–5), and maintaining the distinction between expanding options and prescribing conclusions (Stages 6–7).

Mechanisms of Change by Prevention Level

What 'restoring identity optionality' looks like in practice differs substantially across the public-health-derived primary/secondary/tertiary prevention typology (Marsden, Lewis & Knott, 2019). Each level requires different tools and institutional arrangements while operating on the same underlying construct.

Primary prevention (population-level resilience) focuses on the external dimension: ensuring that alternatives genuinely exist and are accessible within communities. The mechanism of change is identity literacy education. Building on Schachter and Galili-Schachter's (2012) concept of identity literacy — the proficiency and willingness to engage with the meaning systems embedded within texts and to consider adopting them as part of one's own personal meaning system — we propose that primary prevention requires extending this concept from text-based engagement to metacognitive awareness of how identity processes shape information engagement more broadly. The objective is not to teach people what to think (fact-checking) or how to think (critical literacy), but how to recognise when their thinking is being targeted through identity-based psychological pressure. The practical analogue here is Liht and Savage's (2013) "Being Muslim Being British" programme, which works on integrative complexity and value pluralism — structurally an EAN-type intervention that Marsden, Lewis and Knott (2019, p. 3) explicitly tier-tag as primary. The EAN model provides the theoretical generalisation of what Liht and Savage demonstrated in a single curriculum: identity literacy can be developed across diverse populations through structured exposure to multiple frameworks for organising identity, not only through faith-tradition-specific complexity work. By contrast, Marsden, Lewis and Knott (2019, pp. 8–9) report that the USAID Sahel radio programme found "radio exposure had no impact on attitudes supporting violence in the name of Islam or for implementing Sharia… media content tends to have limited impact on beliefs relating to deeply-held religious, social or political commitments." This is exactly what the EAN framework predicts when broadcast counter-messaging attacks semiotic material without expanding the organising framework.

Secondary prevention (targeted intervention with at-risk individuals) requires both dimensions of identity optionality to be addressed simultaneously. The mechanism of change is the proactive placement of culturally grounded alternative narratives into the information ecosystems where vulnerable individuals are being targeted, combined with relational work

that begins to rebuild internal capacity. Tools include the implementation logic described above: semiotic/narrative analysis to identify which identity constructions are being activated in specific contexts, and the identification of credible community voices to act as messengers. The key distinction from counter-narrative is that EANs do not tell people what not to believe (which triggers defensive identity responses); they offer something that satisfies the same needs through channels that do not require division. Khalil, Zeuthen and Marsden (2023, p. 23) observe that intervention providers in the UK "urge beneficiaries to reflect upon 'the credibility of the ideologues who had often been influential on the path to extremism,' helping them comprehend that 'the information they felt supported violence was not as well evidenced as they had come to believe' (Marsden, 2017)." This practitioner instinct is precisely what the EAN mechanism predicts: credibility-of-source attention does not attack ideology, it expands the diagnostic frame within which the individual evaluates their identity options.

Tertiary prevention (post-conviction or post-engagement rehabilitation) makes the internal dimension of identity optionality paramount. The mechanism of change is therapeutic identity restoration: rebuilding the internal capacity for self-authorship and narrative agency before external alternatives can be meaningfully taken up. The Healthy Identity Intervention (Hall, Kenyon & Carter, 2025; Keane et al., 2023) — discussed in detail in the next section — operates through precisely this mechanism. At this level, EAN-informed practice maps directly onto Khalil, Zeuthen and Marsden's (2023) five-outcome results chain, addressing Identity (Outcome 2) and Needs (Outcome 4) while engaging with Ideology (Outcome 3) as the semiotic medium through which identity expansion is achieved.

This level-specific specification answers a recurring practitioner question — what does EAN look like in different institutional settings — without collapsing the framework into a single intervention type. The same theoretical architecture generates different operational forms because the prevention levels operate on different dimensions of the same underlying construct.

Connection to Existing Practitioner Frameworks

EAN's mechanism-level account is complementary to, not competitive with, two existing architectures on which the practitioner literature has converged: the Phoenix Model of disengagement and the ABC Model of programme design.

Phoenix Model. Silke et al. (2021), synthesising a thematic analysis of 29 high-quality empirical studies screened from 83,536 sources (Morrison et al., 2021), identify identity transformation as the foundational dynamic of disengagement, with three observed sub-dynamics: rejection of an existing extremist identity; search and elevation of an alternative identity; and transformation of a militant identity into a peaceful identity that retains similar underlying values. Catalysts (actor, psychological, environmental) only produce change when filtered by trust, perceived opportunity, and security concerns. As they put it, "The model flags a central role for identity transformation in the process of change, and the significance of other factors is in relation to how they can catalyse such change, provide opportunities for it to occur or present blockages to its progress" (Silke et al., 2021, p. 315). Phoenix's three identity dynamics map precisely onto EAN's optionality moves: rejection corresponds to release from a fixed semiotic position; search-and-elevation to adding a viable self-option; transformation-while-retaining-values to re-organising the same underlying needs through alternative semiotic frames.

The third Phoenix dynamic deserves particular emphasis. The empirical observation that some former extremists transform a militant identity into a peaceful identity that retains similar underlying values is the most powerful empirical instantiation of the equal in Equal-Alternative Narrative. The individual does not abandon the values that organised their identity; they find a different semiotic vehicle for the same underlying commitments. EAN proposes value-rehoming, not value-substitution. Phoenix's evidence suggests that this is what disengagement-without-deradicalisation actually looks like in practice. Phoenix's "perceived opportunity" filter, similarly, is functionally identical to EAN's subjective dimension of identity optionality — individuals who are ideologically detached can remain engaged when no exit pathway is perceived as available. Phoenix nowhere identifies counter-narrative argumentation as a primary mechanism. EAN should therefore be positioned as the mechanism-level specification of what Phoenix maps empirically: Phoenix shows what happens during exit; EAN specifies the mechanism by which intervention catalyses what Phoenix describes.

ABC Model. The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective Model (Khalil, Horgan & Zeuthen, 2022) and its operationalisation in the 2023 CREST/RUSI Guide (Khalil, Zeuthen & Marsden, 2023) supply a programme-design scaffold that EAN grounds theoretically. ABC's

foundational claim is that attitudinal sympathy for violence and behavioural participation in violence are analytically separate dimensions; the 2023 Guide's five-outcome results chain — Networks, Identity, Ideology, Needs, Wellbeing — puts this separation into practice as a programme-design structure. The Guide explicitly justifies the inclusion of an Ideology outcome alongside the others: "such sympathies often do play a pivotal role in participation, and it is on this basis that we include efforts to address violence justifying ideologies as Outcome 3 in our results chain" (Khalil, Zeuthen & Marsden, 2023, p. 22). The Guide's Table 1 (p. 10) identifies the individual-incentive drivers — later operationalised under Outcome 4 (Needs) — as "security, status, a sense of identity, purpose, belonging, self-esteem, adventure, duty fulfilment, vengeance, salvation, and so on."

The five-outcome chain already separates Identity (Outcome 2) from Ideology (Outcome 3); EAN supplies the theoretical justification for why this separation works: they exist at different ontological levels. The Guide thereby formalises practitioner intuition — that effective programmes address identity, needs, and networks separately rather than treating ideology as a master variable — that the EAN framework explains theoretically. EAN-informed practice maps directly onto the chain: provide alternative ways for individuals to interpret who they are and what their situation means (Outcome 2: Identity — what Snow and Benford (1988) term the diagnostic identity frame), while meeting psychological needs (Outcome 4), operating through the ideological/semiotic layer (Outcome 3) rather than against it.

Convergent Evidence: The Healthy Identity Intervention as Independent Validation

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for the EAN framework's validity comes from the Healthy Identity Intervention (HII), the UK's primary psychologically-informed programme for individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences. HII was developed within His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) independently of the EAN model, yet its intervention logic converges with EAN predictions in several specific respects. Hall, Kenyon, and Carter (2025), presenting the HII Model of Change in this journal, describe a programme designed to reduce reoffending and promote disengagement by helping participants build emotional tolerance, understand their personal values, and find pro-social ways to meet identity-related needs — thereby fostering personal agency. The HII does not

primarily seek to dismantle ideology; it seeks to expand the individual's identity repertoire and restore the capacity for self-authorship.

The interim outcome evaluation by Keane et al. (2023), examining 70 terrorism-connected offenders, found statistically significant positive changes in risk markers related to extremist engagement and intent, alongside increases in desistance-related skills. Qualitatively, participants reported re-defining personal identity with increased prosocial development and positive future priorities. The therapeutic alliance with the facilitator — not ideological correction — was identified as the critically important mechanism. This finding is consistent with the EAN model's emphasis on relational contexts that restore narrative agency — the internal dimension of identity optionality: the therapeutic relationship provides a space in which the individual can safely explore alternative self-narratives, precisely the kind of 'equal-alternative' that the model theorises as necessary for disengagement.

A nuance in the Keane et al. findings deserves honest engagement. The evaluation found no significant changes in the disillusionment and identity domains, despite significant improvements in engagement, intent, and skills. Within an ideology-centric framework, this presents a paradox: how can individuals reduce their engagement with extremism without becoming disillusioned with the ideology? The EAN model resolves this apparent contradiction. If ideology functions primarily as an expression of underlying identity needs rather than as a causal driver, then an individual whose needs are being met through alternative pathways may disengage from extremist behaviour without necessarily repudiating the beliefs that once organised their identity. The beliefs become less functionally necessary — less the only available framework for making sense of experience — even if they are not explicitly rejected. This is consistent with Cherney and Koehler's (2023) theory of change for sustained desistance, which emphasises that disengagement is iterative and ongoing rather than a single ideological break, and with Koehler's broader trajectory from depluralization theory (Koehler, 2014) toward meaning-centred intervention design (Koehler & Klosinski, 2024), which argues that deradicalisation counselling must address the 'crisis of meaning' that follows departure from an extremist milieu.

Testable Predictions and Future Empirical Work

The convergent evidence sketched above — the HII findings, the Phoenix Model synthesis, and the structural fit between EAN and the ABC five-outcome chain — is illustrative, not confirmatory; it demonstrates the EAN framework's analytical coherence and points toward, rather than provides, a definitive empirical test. The framework generates several specific, testable predictions for future research. First, programmes that systematically assess and address individual psychosocial needs should produce greater reductions in extremist engagement than programmes of equivalent intensity that focus primarily on ideological counter-argumentation. Second, individuals who develop measurably greater identity optionality — operationalised as the capacity to articulate multiple identity narratives across different life domains and to perceive viable alternatives to their current identity position — should show more sustained desistance than those who report ideological disillusionment alone. Third, behavioural disengagement should be achievable without complete ideological deradicalisation, provided that alternative need-fulfilment pathways are genuinely available and psychologically viable. The recent field intervention by Belanger et al. (2025), which used prosocial role models grounded in the 3N framework (Kruglanski et al., 2019) to reduce both search for meaning and criminal attitudes in high-risk youth, provides a methodological model for how such predictions might be tested. Moving from exemplary evidence to systematic empirical evaluation represents the necessary next step for the EAN research programme.

Theoretical and Practical Implications of the EAN Model

The theoretical framework and convergent evidence presented above, taken together, carry significant implications for how we understand, predict, and respond to violent extremism. Moving away from an over-reliance on the common definition of ‘ideology’ (as a belief system) as the primary causal factor allows for a more nuanced appreciation of the complex interplay between individual psychology, social context, and the varied and contextual appeal of extremist groups and their messages. A particularly significant implication of the framework's analysis is that vulnerability to narrative monopolisation extends beyond those with overt extremist sympathies: the positioning theory analysis suggests that constrained

identity optionality constitutes a widespread structural vulnerability, and that even prosocial identity fusion provides exploitable attack vectors when it shuts down the capacity for flexible reconfiguration.

One key implication relates to the terminology itself. The term 'radicalisation,' with its inherent focus on ideological adoption, may be less accurate or useful than concepts like 'grooming' or 'indoctrination' in many cases, particularly when individuals are drawn into groups primarily through the fulfilment of social or emotional needs rather than deep ideological conviction (Schuurman & Taylor, 2018). Empirical work on disengagement supports the same point: in the Phoenix Model synthesis (Silke et al., 2021), ideology is downstream of identity transformation, and divergent trajectories of individuals within the same ideological environment are better explained by differential access to alternative identity options than by differences in belief. The EAN approach aligns with this finding by focusing on the function the extremist group or narrative serves for the individual. Alternative frameworks like Taylor's (1991) concept of 'fanaticism', revisited by Schuurman and Taylor (2018), also attempt to address the belief-behaviour link more conditionally, suggesting beliefs only translate to violence under specific circumstances (e.g., totality of ideological control, millenarianism).

EAN also reframes intervention efforts. Instead of primarily focusing on ‘deradicalisation’ through counter-narratives that set out to ‘disengage’ the individual from the ideology, the emphasis shifts towards facilitating ‘regeneration’ of identity flexibility by addressing the underlying needs-based vulnerabilities and restoring identity optionality. This aligns with observations that disengagement often occurs for reasons unrelated to ideological change (Bjørgo & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009; Schuurman & Taylor, 2018). For interventions to be effective, particularly in a criminal justice context, they require a clear theoretical and practical framework, or a Model of Change (MoC), to guide their processes and outcomes (Hall, Kenyon & Carter, 2025). The HII findings discussed above are particularly instructive: behavioural disengagement without ideological disillusionment is precisely what the EAN model predicts when alternative need-fulfilment pathways become available. The challenge for the field is to move beyond approaches that lack robust evaluation toward interventions with clear, testable models of change — and the design logic

and implementation stages set out above provide an architecture for doing so within existing practitioner frameworks (Khalil, Zeuthen & Marsden, 2023; Silke et al., 2021).

It is also important to consider that understanding extremism through the lens of identity pathology and the erosion of identity optionality may enhance predictive capabilities. Linguistic analysis, as explored by researchers like Smith et al. (2020) and exemplified by tools like the Profile Risk Assessment Tool (PRAT) developed by Akrami et al. (2018), aims to detect psychological risk markers (related to personality, emotion, social self) in written communication. Smith et al. (2020) specifically demonstrated that within-person changes in conformity to extremist linguistic style and vernacular could be tracked over time in social media data and were associated with 'mobilizing interactions' (communications about shared grievances, harm, anger, and collective action). Comparative manifesto analysis focusing on identity fusion and threat perception also shows promise, identifying linguistic markers (like kinship language and existential threat narratives) that differentiate violent from non-violent authors (Ebner et al., 2022). Such approaches, focusing on detecting markers of identity fusion, grievance, cognitive rigidity, or other indicators of vulnerability, potentially tracking their development over time through linguistic shifts, rather than just searching for static ideological keywords, may offer more reliable risk assessment. Identifying individuals exhibiting a significant erosion of identity optionality, regardless of the specific ideology they currently express, might be a more robust indicator of potential threat.

Ultimately, the shift towards an identity-focused, needs-based approach like EAN, complemented by an understanding of identity optionality, offers a more holistic and potentially more effective framework than one narrowly focused on countering ideology. It acknowledges the heterogeneity of pathways into extremism and provides a basis for developing more tailored and humane interventions.

Limitations, Operational Constraints, and Future Directions

Several limitations and directions for future research merit acknowledgment. First, while the theoretical framework integrates insights from diverse literatures — social psychology, psychological anthropology, neurobiology, and clinical practice — direct empirical testing of the EAN approach remains limited. The framework builds on evidence from related interventions, particularly the Healthy Identity Intervention (Dean, 2014; Hall,

Kenyon & Carter, 2025), and suggestive parallels from memory reconsolidation research (Ecker & Vaz, 2022), but systematic evaluation across diverse populations and contexts is needed. We present this as a theoretically grounded framework that merits rigorous empirical investigation, not as an established evidence-based practice. The integrative scope of the framework engages with what Dawson (2026) terms the specificity and heterogeneity problems in extremism studies — the difficulty of identifying mechanisms that distinguish those who radicalise from the much larger population of those who hold similar views or experience similar grievances, and the challenge of theorising across the diversity of pathways into extremism. The EAN framework's claim is that identity optionality provides a more specific mechanism than grievance, marginalisation, or psychopathology, and one capable of integrating across heterogeneous pathways at the level of identity organisation rather than ideological content — but verifying that claim requires the kind of fine-grained, first-person empirical work that Kloosterboer and Harambam (2026) argue is necessary for explanation, not merely description, of extreme actors. In particular, the concepts of a semi-fused baseline state and the structural vulnerability of prosocial fusion represent novel theoretical claims that extend existing findings — from positioning theory and identity fusion research respectively — into territory that has not been directly investigated. Empirical research measuring baseline identity optionality across populations, and examining whether prosocial fusion states are indeed susceptible to redirection through threat narratives as the framework predicts, would provide critical tests of these claims.

Second, any intervention framework carries risks of deployment within problematic policy structures. CVE programmes have been critiqued for extending surveillance, securitising communities, and conflating political dissent with terrorism risk (Kundnani, 2014; Heath-Kelly, 2013; Ajil, 2023). While the EAN approach explicitly aims to expand rather than constrain identity options and to work with rather than upon communities, we acknowledge that psychological frameworks can be co-opted for purposes counter to their stated aims. Implementation requires attention to power dynamics, genuine community partnership, avoidance of surveillance-oriented applications, and reflexivity about how even well-intentioned interventions may reproduce harm. Practitioners must remain vigilant about the difference between empowerment and managed compliance.

Third, beyond these conceptual concerns, EAN-informed interventions face operational constraints common to all P/CVE work: alignment with existing safeguarding frameworks (most demanding at the secondary and tertiary levels); resource limitations that constrain the depth of needs assessment that can be sustained at scale; political sensitivities around any work that touches identity formation, particularly in contexts where state-led interventions risk being read as identity-shaping; and the inter-agency coordination required to deliver work across education, health, criminal justice, and community settings. The public health framing (Marsden, Lewis & Knott, 2019) provides the institutional architecture for this coordination, with forensic psychologists, clinical psychologists, social workers, and mental health professionals contributing within their existing professional competencies. Two design features of the EAN approach reduce some operational risks: its ideological agnosticism — focusing on psychological manipulation techniques (us/them dynamics, identity rigidity) rather than ideological content — reduces political sensitivity, and its requirement of community-credible voices and channels reduces the risk that interventions read as imposed rather than chosen. But operational risk cannot be designed out entirely, and any EAN-informed methodology must embed ethical review, community feedback, and responsible deployment guidelines as constitutive features rather than afterthoughts.

Fourth, while our focus on identity mechanisms aims to access universal psychological processes that operate across cultural contexts, empirical research informing this framework has been conducted predominantly in Western settings. Although the anthropological perspective we adopt — that personality is culture internalised — suggests the framework should be applicable wherever structural conditions become psychologically internalised (which is everywhere), this remains a theoretical claim requiring empirical validation. Research examining how the EAN approach functions in non-Western contexts, particularly where extremist recruitment operates through different social mechanisms or cultural frameworks, would strengthen confidence in the framework's cross-cultural applicability. Similarly, investigation of how culturally-specific identity formations shape the particular pathways through which universal needs manifest would enrich the model.

Fifth, EAN requires sophisticated assessment capabilities to understand individual needs and vulnerabilities accurately enough to outcompete radicalizing content. It necessitates the availability of credible, accessible, and appealing alternative pathways and support

systems, which requires significant investment and potentially multi-agency collaboration. While EAN focuses on the 'pull' factors related to needs, effective propaganda often creates or amplifies grievances and constructs compelling (though false) narratives by creating specific linkages between the in-group/solutions and the out-group/crises within a broader "system of meaning" (Ingram, 2017). This is particularly complex in the online space, where groups like ISIS have proven adept at disseminating propaganda and recruiting vulnerable youth directly via social media (Greenberg, 2016; Kruglova, 2022). Countering these narratives effectively requires addressing these linkages, not just the surface content (Ingram, 2017), although of course, with a well-structured and comprehensive approach anchored in needs fulfilment, this is precisely what EAN should be effective at redressing. But online counter-strategies also face hurdles: disruption efforts like account suspensions may limit reach but risk driving activity underground, while government-led counter-messaging often lacks credibility with target audiences (Greenberg, 2016). EAN, with its focus on needs and authentic alternatives, aligns with recommendations to empower credible community voices and provide constructive outlets, but scaling such efforts effectively online remains difficult (Greenberg, 2016).

Sixth, there is the challenge of addressing individuals for whom violence itself is the primary draw (e.g., violent criminals co-opting an ideology). While EAN may still offer avenues by addressing underlying personality factors or unmet needs contributing to these stances, it may need to be integrated with other security and risk management measures.

Finally, while we argue that examining identity mechanisms addresses how structural factors operate psychologically, this does not diminish the importance of addressing structural conditions themselves. Psychological intervention is one component of comprehensive response that must also include political, economic, and social dimensions. The EAN framework should be understood as complementary to—not a replacement for—efforts to address discrimination, political representation, economic opportunity, and foreign policy. The goal is to provide individuals with expanded agency and identity options within their contexts while simultaneously working to transform those contexts. Psychological and structural interventions are not competing alternatives but mutually reinforcing dimensions of the same larger project: creating conditions in which individuals have genuine choices about how to construct meaningful identities and respond to grievances constructively.

Conclusion: Towards a Needs-Based, Identity-Focused Paradigm

This paper has presented an integrative theoretical framework — the Equal-Alternative Narrative (EAN) model — that reconceptualises vulnerability to violent extremism through the lens of identity optionality: the range and accessibility of viable identity positions available to an individual, together with the psychological capacity to perceive and move between them. By treating ideology as an expression of underlying personality needs and identity conflicts rather than the sole driver, EAN shifts attention from what individuals believe to the function that extremist affiliation serves — and therefore to what a credible alternative must provide. The framework makes several distinctive contributions: conceptualising identity optionality as a dynamic spectrum rather than a binary state; demonstrating through positioning theory that constrained optionality constitutes a widespread, structurally produced latent vulnerability across populations; showing that even prosocial identity fusion represents a structurally vulnerable state exploitable through threat narratives; and establishing the theoretical basis for primary prevention through educational approaches that expand identity optionality from childhood.

The convergent evidence examined here — from the Phoenix Model synthesis (Silke et al., 2021; Morrison et al., 2021), from the Healthy Identity Intervention's finding that behavioural disengagement can proceed without complete ideological deradicalisation (Hall, Kenyon & Carter, 2025; Keane et al., 2023), and from the convergent trajectory of contemporary scholarship on the role of ideology (Holbrook & Horgan, 2019; Dawson, 2021a, 2021b; Peels, 2025) — provides initial grounding for this framework. The EAN model also suggests avenues for enhancing predictive capabilities by focusing on markers of identity optionality erosion (such as identity fusion combined with threat perception) and tracking their development through linguistic analysis (Akrami et al., 2018; Ebner et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2020), rather than solely on ideological content.

The next step for the EAN research programme is to move from theoretical coherence to systematic empirical evaluation — refining the model as a robust Model of Change, developing practical assessment tools, testing EAN-informed interventions across diverse populations and contexts, and investigating educational approaches to identity optionality expansion as a form of primary prevention. The operationalisation set out above — design

logic, implementation stages, prevention-level mechanisms, and connections to Phoenix and ABC — provides the architecture for this transition from theory to scalable, testable practice.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

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