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Wim Meeus

**To cite this article:** Wim Meeus (2015) Why do young people become Jihadists? A theoretical account on radical identity development, European Journal of Developmental Psychology, 12:3, 275-281, DOI: [10.1080/17405629.2015.1024106](https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2015.1024106)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2015.1024106>



Published online: 08 Apr 2015.



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## Why do young people become Jihadists? A theoretical account on radical identity development

Wim Meeus<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Adolescent Development, Utrecht University, P.O. Box 80.140, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands

<sup>2</sup>Department of Developmental Psychology, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

Identity status theory and Lofland and Starks' (1965, *Becoming a world-saver: A theory of conversion to a deviant perspective*, *American Sociological Review*, 30, 862–875) model of religious conversion were used to explain why young people become jihad fighters. Both theories maintain that young people with unclear commitments are vulnerable for radical identity change. A religious problem-solving perspective, along with a self-definition as religious seeker, steers this potential identity change into the direction of religious conversion. This may lead young Muslims or young people with an uncertain identity and a religious orientation to move closer to radical Islam and jihad. Also, research from both traditions found that absence of positive affective bonds with relevant others go together with unstable identity. A new group with a clear defined mission may therefore be able to solve their problems in two ways: it offers warm interpersonal bonds, as well as potential new personal goals and commitments. Groups of jihadists are perfectly fit to serve this twofold purpose.

**Keywords:** Jihadists; Identity Status Theory; Religious Conversion.

... authorities also categorize volunteers ... as disaffected, aimless and lacking a sense of identity or belonging. This appears to be common ... and fits with the high number of converts, presumably people who are seeking a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. (Barrett, 2014)

In 2014, about 2500 young men from the West (European Union, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) were fighting as jihadists in Syria (Barrett, 2014). Why do young people decide to make this drastic transition? Why do they

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Correspondence should be addressed to Wim Meeus, Adolescent Development, Utrecht University, P.O. Box 80.140, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands. E-mail: [w.meeus@uu.nl](mailto:w.meeus@uu.nl)  
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

leave their home and country and embark on a very uncertain and unsafe journey? Obviously, both questions have a developmental tone to them. They ask for the developmental process leading to jihadism. A prospective longitudinal study would offer the ideal design to study this transition into jihadism. Given the low prevalence of this transition (below 1%), such a study would need a sample of at least 30,000 young people to address the question. Conducting such a study is therefore hardly feasible. Thus, I will offer a theoretical explanation addressing this question. My explanation starts from two assumptions: (1) a minimal level of self-certainty and (2) integration in interpersonal and institutional contexts are requirements to navigate securely through life. Both assumptions can be found in many social scientific studies and theories. For instance, research has shown that systematic organization (profile stability) of personality goes together with better adjustment (Klimstra, Luyckx, Hale, Goossens, & Meeus, 2010). Further social investment theory (Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005) claims that investment in adult roles fosters adaptive personality development. Additionally, Hirschi's (1969) social control theory posits that positive bonds with relevant others and societal institutions prevent people from committing delinquent acts. Both assumptions also imply that lack of self-certainty and poor social integration make people vulnerable for radical identity change. I will frame the transition of becoming a jihadist as radical identity change, and use identity and religious conversion theory to explain it.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

Marcia's (1966) identity status model has become the most important vehicle of empirical study of identity formation in adolescence and emerging adulthood. In Marcia's model, a person has a well-defined identity when he/she has strong commitments in various life domains after having explored various alternative commitments. Marcia labelled this identity configuration as identity achievement. Individuals without commitments and exploration were labelled as identity diffusions, individuals with commitments without exploration of alternatives as foreclosures and individuals without commitments and in the process of exploring alternative commitments as moratoriums. In Marcia's model, identity achievement—and to a lesser extent foreclosure—represent stable personal identity. Recent studies found support for the stability of the achievement and foreclosure statuses. A recent meta-analysis showed that stability of achievement was substantially higher than stability of the other statuses (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010). Similarly, Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, and Branje (2010) showed 4-year stability of achievement and closure<sup>1</sup> to be substantially higher than stability of the moratorium and diffusion statuses.

<sup>1</sup>The Meeus–Crocetti model uses the label closure instead of foreclosure. See Meeus et al. (2010, p. 1568) for an explanation.

There is also massive empirical support to substantiate the notion that stable identity is more adaptive. A review of Identity Status Interview studies found achievers and foreclosures to have lower levels of internalizing problems (anxiety, negative affect, tendency to worry and depression) than moratoriums and diffusions (Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999). Studies using the more recent European models of identity formation of Luyckx et al., (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006), and Meeus et al. (2010) found similar results for internalizing problems in cross-sectional (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008a; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005) and longitudinal studies (Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2008; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, & Branje, 2012), and also found achievers and (fore)closures to have lower levels of drug use, direct aggression and delinquency. Klimstra et al. (2011) found that adolescent delinquents referred to a penitentiary youth institution were 18 times more likely to be in moratorium or diffusion, compared to a control group (56.7% and 3.3%, respectively).

In addition to these identity status studies, a number of publications (Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus, 2012; Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008b; Luyckx et al., 2006) have addressed the link between the separate identity dimensions (commitment, exploration in depth, exploration in breadth, reconsideration if commitment) and adjustment. Findings of these studies are very consistent with the identity status studies. On the one hand, commitment was found to be linked to positive outcomes in various domains: to less depression and anxiety, more self-esteem, better academic adjustment and more social responsibility and civic engagement. On the other hand, dimensions indicating identity uncertainty, including exploration in breadth and reconsideration of commitment, were linked to more depression and anxiety, substance use and delinquency. In sum, we might conclude that the high-commitment statuses are more stable over time and more often serve as endpoint of development. Strong commitments also appear to be linked to adaptive development in various domains, whereas identity uncertainty goes together with less adaptive development.

Additionally, there is systematic evidence that identity certainty goes together with more positive interpersonal relationships. Strong commitments were found to be linked to more positive relationships with parents (support, attachment, absence of psychological control), whereas the opposite was true for exploration in breadth and reconsideration of commitment (Beyers & Goossens, 2008; Crocetti et al., 2008a, 2008b; Luyckx, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Berzonsky, 2007). Similarly, Meeus, Oosterwegel, and Vollebergh (2002) reported a positive link between interpersonal commitments and peer attachment. We can conclude that identity certainty goes together with positive relationships with parents and peers.

## RADICAL IDENTITY CHANGE: RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

The short review of identity research above indicates that young people with less certain identities show less adaptive development and have less positive relationships with relevant others. It is therefore not surprising that this category of young people has the highest chance to change identity over time. Meeus et al. (2010) offered the most clear empirical demonstration of this notion: 4-year chances to leave the more uncertain identity statuses (diffusion, moratorium and searching moratorium) ranged between 61% and 82%, whereas chances to leave the more certain identity states (achievement and closure) were substantially lower (between 20% and 38%). This is where the transition to jihadism becomes relevant. This transition can be conceptualized as radical identity change. Identity research suggests this transition to be more likely in young people with uncertain identities and less supportive interpersonal relationships. But under what conditions does this radical identity change lead to a radical jihadist identity? I turn to research on religious conversion to offer an explanation.

The original model of religious conversion was formulated by Lofland and Stark (1965). They studied a group of 15 young people who converted themselves to the religious cult of the "Divine Precepts". Lofland and Stark formulated seven conditions for religious conversion, three predisposing and four situational conditions. The three predisposing conditions are present before conversion. To become a potential convert, a person must: (1) experience enduring personal tensions, especially due to inability to realize personal aspirations; (2) operate within a religious problem-solving perspective; (3) define him/herself as a religious seeker. The four situational conditions describe the actual process of conversion. A person becomes a convert when: (1) he/she meets a religious group at a turning point in life; (2) is invited to form affective bonds with one or more members of the group; (3) does not have affective bonds with persons outside the group, or loses them and (4) starts intensive interaction with the group in order to become an agent of the group. Lofland and Stark claim that the seven steps represent the necessary and sufficient conditions for conversion. They assume that the conditions have a "tunnel-like" effect; that is, for each condition met, the actual number of potential converts decreases, while chances to become a convert increase for those remaining in the process.

Empirical studies have found support for most of the conditions of the Lofland and Stark model (see for instance Ebaugh & Vaughn, 1984; Heirich, 1977). One of first studies that included a matched control group next to the group of converts was conducted by Kox, Meeus, and 't Hart (1991). Kox and colleagues studied conversion to the Unification Church and the Pentecostal Church among adolescents and emerging adults, and found very strong support for the Lofland and Stark model. They reported large differences between the group of converts and the control group on all conditions of the model. In a discriminant analysis, they were able to classify 89% of the respondents correctly as member of the

group of converts or the control group. These findings underscore the power of the Lofland and Stark model for explaining religious conversion and radical identity change.

In concert, Marcia's identity theory and the Lofland and Stark model offer a plausible explanation for why young people become jihadists. Both theories maintain that an uncertain identity is liable to change. This holds for the moratorium and diffusion statuses in identity theory, and predisposing Condition 1 (enduring personal tensions) in the Lofland and Stark model. This means that young people are vulnerable for radical identity change when they have unclear commitments and personal stress due to inability to realize personal goals. A religious problem-solving perspective and a self-definition as a religious seeker steers this potential identity change into the direction of religious conversion. This may lead young Muslims with an uncertain identity, or young people with an uncertain identity and a religious orientation, to move closer to radical Islam and jihad. Additionally, research from both traditions found that an absence of positive affective bonds with relevant others goes together with unstable identity. Young people with poor family relationships and poor friendships are especially likely to lack appropriate interpersonal contexts for building an identity. A new group with a clear, defined mission may therefore be able to solve their problems in two ways: it offers warm interpersonal bonds, as well as potential new personal goals and commitments. Groups of jihadists are perfectly fit to serve this twofold purpose. Without any doubt, groups have the capacity to install new identities in their members, as Lofland and Stark showed.

How can societies prevent young people from converting to radical Islam and embracing jihad? First and foremost, societies should offer young people opportunities to commit to life goals and shape their identity. Every young person should have the chance to invest in regular adult roles. As this review has shown, the process of conversion to radical Islam has uncertain identity as its point of departure. Further, helping returning jihadists to reintegrate into society seems crucial to prevent them to carry out assaults on citizens or institutions in their home country. Acceptance by society constitutes the best antidote against radicalism.

Finally, note a limitation to this analysis. Conversion may lead to jihadism, but need for adventure and escapism might also do so. A thorough assessment of the various motivations for becoming a jihadist calls for a systematic study among returning jihadists. Such a study probably can be completed in a relatively short time.

*Manuscript received 20 February 2015*

*Revised manuscript accepted 24 February 2015*

*First published online 27 March 2015*

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