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Transitional Journeys Into and Out of Extremism. A Biographical Approach

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ABSTRACT

This article describes an empirical study into processes of homegrown radicalization and de-radicalization of young people. Researchers in Denmark and the Netherlands set out to answer the question regarding what pathways in and out of extremism (mainly far-right or Islamist) look like “from the inside.” The analysis is informed by grounded theory, based on interviews ($N = 34$) with “formers” and their family members on their life courses. The study shows that radicalization often concurs with distinct social–emotional developmental challenges that young people face in the transition between youth and adulthood. A practical implication of the marked transitional sequences in these processes is that each type of radical journey may call for a different type of (re) action.

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What do pathways into and out of extremism look like based on accounts by former homegrown radicals and their families? Although many books and articles cover the problems of radicalization, extremism, and terrorism,¹ there is a lack of empirical studies on radicalization that start from the information by persons who hold or held radical violent views themselves and their relatives. Therefore, this study approached formers and their families in Denmark and the Netherlands to discuss their journey into and out of extremism.²

Radicalization is understood by many as the process by which a person becomes increasingly hateful toward a part of society and anyone who defends the status quo.³ It is a process by which people increasingly adopt more extreme attitudes and behavior that might involve approval of the use of violence by others or displaying this violence themselves to stimulate fear in the general population in an attempt to instigate changes in a society. Some scholars notice that no universally accepted definition exists, even though radicalization has been subjected to many scientific studies.⁴ In order to account for the relative meaning of radicalization, the definition used in this research was based on existing definitions and on the conversations we had with our respondents. In this study, radicalization is considered to occur when a child or adolescent starts to develop political or religious ideas and agency that are

so fundamentally at odds with the upbringing environment's or mainstream's expectations that the relationship with the upbringers or educators becomes at stake. Again, this definition is not exhausting, neither is it universal, but it became clear that parents, practitioners, and social workers welcome this definition as it adds a pedagogical element to the existing—mainly security driven—definitions of radicalization.

Another central concept in this particular study is de-radicalization. John Horgan, who conducted a lot of research in this field, regards de-radicalization as a social and psychological process whereby an individual's commitment to and involvement in violent radicalization is reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and engagement in violent activity.⁵ As Rabasa et al. note in the context of their study on Islamist terrorist rehabilitation programs,⁶ “there is a view in the scholarly community that de-radicalization may not be a realistic objective and that the goal of [these programs] should be disengagement”. This discussion is important for (research on) intervention programs, but was not central to our study. In our study a *former* (extremist) is defined as a person who has left a political or religious group with a violent agenda *or* someone who has sworn off ideological violence that one once used or condoned. Some of the respondents were convicted for hate crimes or terrorism, but not all. All respondents, though, recognized themselves in the description of “formers” and their family members confirmed this description.

This article centers on personal life stories and will try to answer the question regarding what their pathways into and out of radical membership looked like, and the role transitions into adulthood played in these journeys. The first section provides a brief overview of existing literature on factors that lead young people into and out of extremism. Then, the methodology, based on grounded theory, is presented. The results section will present three ideal-typical journeys into and out of radical ideology or membership, and illustrate these using thick description case material. The next section will analyze the journeys into and out of radicalization, and discuss the role that transitions into adulthood play in these journeys. Last, the article will consider some important limitations to the research and formulate some careful conclusions and recommendations.

Factors that Lead toward Extremism

Prior research shows that radicalization could be caused by a complex mix of push and pull factors.⁷ *Push* factors can be seen as underlying causes of radicalization, pushing people toward radical groups. *Pull* factors are positive characteristics and benefits of belonging to a radical group, which make people feel attracted to these groups.⁸

There exists a high volume of research that focuses on push and pull factors, all from different perspectives. Some researchers⁹ name *personal exclusion* and *social isolation* as important push factors in radicalization. Others¹⁰ point toward *discrimination*. Again others¹¹ consider a *problematic home situation* and *problems in school* to be important push factors, while there are also researchers¹² who see a *search for identity* and *injustice in the world* to be key push factors.¹³

Pull factors that came forward in prior research are the *presence of radical groups or networks*,¹⁴ *presence of radical groups on the Internet*,¹⁵ *family members or friends that are already members of a radical group*,¹⁶ and *rewards* that are part of the membership like status, adventure, or social inclusion.¹⁷ Some authors¹⁸ point out that push and pull factors

that lead to radicalization never come alone: it is the combination of factors that leads to radicalization. Moreover, push and pull factors differ per individual.¹⁹

Factors that Lead Away from Extremism

Researchers also found push and pull factors for disengaging from radical groups. Here, push factors are negative aspects of being part of a radical group that make members turn away from the group. Pull factors are external influences that attract people outside the radical group. Altier et al. give an excellent review²⁰ of research on push and pull factors that lead people away from terrorist groups. *Unmet expectations*,²¹ *disillusionment with strategy/actions of the radical group*,²² *disillusionment with members of the group*,²³ *difficulty adapting to underground lifestyle*,²⁴ *inability to cope with effects of violence*,²⁵ *loss of faith in ideology*,²⁶ and *burnout symptoms*,²⁷ are push factors found in prior research.²⁸

Furthermore, the following pull factors come forward in previous research: *competing loyalties*, when people leave radical groups because they become loyal to people outside the group.²⁹ *New employment or educational opportunities*,³⁰ *marriage or starting a family*,³¹ and *positive interactions with moderates like family members*³² were also found to pull people away from radical groups.

Transitions

The push and pull factors are well-known factors in radicalization research and previous research showed that it usually is a complex mix of factors that lead to radicalization and away from it.³³ Moreover, determining isolated background variables (such as ethnicity, level of education, and socioeconomic status) seems not always sufficient for understanding the radicalization process. In previous research, the helpful terminology of “pathways” and “routes” was introduced to go beyond the idea that static variables cause radicalization.³⁴ This study builds on Horgan’s psychological work³⁵ in which radicalization is rather to be seen as pathways in which people develop radical ideals, influenced by various push and pull factors and the interaction between them. More specifically, the aim here was to see what role the upbringing climate and developmental challenges played within these pathways. Therefore, a biographical approach was introduced in which the radicalization and de-radicalization (or disengagement) processes are seen as different stages in the same developmental journey. A biographical approach focuses on the life courses of respondents and “seeks to understand the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their daily lives, what they see as important, and how to provide interpretations of the accounts they give of their past, present and future.”³⁶

Moreover, the grounded-theory methodology implied attention to the meanings and categorizations used by the subjects involved in the study. Where the majority of studies on radicalization seem to adopt mainly an outsider research perspective,³⁷ also called an “etic” perspective,³⁸ the few existing empirical studies with (former) extremists defend a rather emic perspective,³⁹ in which the meanings given by the respondents are central.⁴⁰ An emic perspective to radicalized individuals reveals social-emotional⁴¹ developmental stages in which they can encounter difficulties like financial problems, serious family conflict, social exclusion, cultural humiliation, feelings of uselessness, confrontation with death, and so on, which they have to overcome. During this journey, parents and social practitioners may

either exacerbate these predicaments or be able to assist young people to navigate these transitions and prevent them from going down a path of radicalization or from developing otherwise troublesome identities.

Transition entails change and adaptation. However, transition is not a different word for change, but refers to the psychological processes involved in adaptation and how people cope with it, and within that process the reconstruction of a valued identity is essential.⁴² These transitions are not solely major life events but can also be more gradual transitions that are common while growing up, which can be considered similar to the turning points that are described in developmental criminology.⁴³ Therefore the concepts of journeys and transitions seem helpful in making sense of the radicalization process from within.

Methods

This study was explorative, as there is only little theoretical knowledge based on empirical biographical research about family and upbringing dynamics within the radicalization and de-radicalization process. Due to this lack of knowledge and existing theories, we chose to use a grounded theory approach,⁴⁴ aiming to generate theory from our gathered qualitative data.

Sampling and Recruitment

The study consisted of thirty-four interviews with formers and their family members (see Table 1). In this study formers who used to act on extreme-right, Islamic extremist, animal, or extreme left-wing ideals were contacted. Research focused on people with various types of former extreme ideals, as there exists growing evidence that processes of radicalization among widely divergent groups show parallel developments.⁴⁵ Stern for example, notes that Jewish, Christian, and Islamic extremists show a similar motivation and resentment causing their ideals to become extreme.⁴⁶ Sageman sees similarities in the moral willingness to use violence in both Nazis and Salafi terrorists.⁴⁷ And Gielen shows that the search for identity plays an important role in the radicalization process of both extreme right-wing as well as extreme Islamic young people. She suggests that the causes for radicalization in both groups do not differ greatly.⁴⁸ Young people with different—even antagonist—extreme ideals often named the same push-and-pull factors that led to their radicalization. They seemed to be entangled in a similar search for belonging, identity, and answers to complicated existential questions, and came across different ideologies during their quest.⁴⁹ It was therefore assumed that, although the de-radicalization process cannot be understood as a radicalization process in reverse, the same would account for the process of de-radicalization. Furthermore, the study contained both male and female respondents, to create a more representative study.

Table 1. Sample

	Right wing	Left wing	Islam	Animal	Male	Female
The Netherlands	5	0	3	3	8	3
Denmark	3	2	4	1	7	3
Total	8	2	7	4	15	6

Due to the nature of the data material required for this study, an application of statistically representative sampling methods was not possible. Denmark and the Netherlands do not have unlimited numbers of potential interviewees with “extremist” backgrounds and experiences. Informants who fit the profile for interviewees and were willing to participate in the study, ideally with some of their family members, turned out to be quite a small group. In Denmark, contact with the interviewees were largely obtained through snowball sampling, starting with contacts mediated through former research acquaintances of the Danish researcher at universities, the Danish Ministry of Children, Gender Equality, Integration and Social Affairs, and various exit programs and think tanks. In the Netherlands the respondents were successfully found with the help of professionals who work in the radicalization field: access to the research group was gained through trusted contacts and specialist organizations working in the field. Also, respondents were approached that had been part of a previous pilot study on radicalization as some of them had disengaged or de-radicalized since their interview.⁵⁰

In order to build trust, private electronic messages were utilized for recruitment. Among this population there exist strong privacy concerns, as having extreme ideals usually involves membership of stigmatized or illegal groups. An approach via e-mail gave respondents the power to open, ignore, delete, or contemplate the request in their own time. Potential participants could then quietly contemplate whether they were willing to participate in an interview and leave “the field” at any time, which made the approach less intrusive.⁵¹ When approaching a potential respondent, usually one invitation message was sent via e-mail. In this message the research team was introduced along with the purpose of the research. In the research and the recruitment e-mail a positive approach was taken toward the research topic. Potential participants were invited to talk about their former strong ideals, rather than using terms like “violent ideas” or “extremist ideology” implying a security perspective, in which their ideals are considered unwanted and dangerous beforehand. In the invitation message, confidentiality throughout the study was guaranteed. After receiving a positive reply, one or two more messages were sent to arrange a time and place to meet for an interview.

Interview Specifics

Interviews were conducted using prepared topic lists. The majority of the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting. Most conversations took place in the privacy of their homes, which gave extra insight in the settings our respondents grew up in. Other respondents were interviewed in public places like parks or cafes, or our university office. Four interviews were conducted through Skype. A webcam was then used to simulate the face-to-face setting. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. Twenty-one formers (fifteen males and six females) were interviewed. Eight respondents used to have extreme-right ideals, four used to be active animal activists, two were former extreme left-wing activists and seven respondents were former Islamic extremists.

In order to raise the level of validity of the data, both formers and their family members were interviewed regarding the same family-historical events: besides twenty-one formers, thirteen parents, nine siblings, one grandparent, one teacher, and three partners completed the case studies. The study also focused on the family context, as journeys into and out of radicalization do not exist in a vacuum. Family members were approached through their

children because the formers were easier to find than their family members and/or significant others.

Interview questions centered on the following topics: ideal development, radicalization, parental reaction, family climate, general upbringing, and de-radicalization. To obtain information about their personal pathways into radicalization, we asked the formers and their family members how they came into contact with the extremist group, whether the parents knew about their ideals, and with what kind of ideals they were brought up with. We also asked about the home situation growing up and how the parent/child relationship was during the radicalization. Furthermore, young respondents and their parents were asked why de-radicalization or disengagement had set in, about parental support during the de-radicalization process, and about the parent/child relationship at that stage.

Furthermore, formers and their family members were asked for suggestions on how to prevent radicalization and how to stimulate de-radicalization. Finally, they were asked about the kind of support (if any) they would have wished to have during the radicalization and de-radicalization processes (see also the Appendix).

Analysis

Analysis was done separately in both countries as interviews were conducted in two different languages (Dutch and Danish). However, the researchers in both countries used the same research questions and topic schemes to direct the analysis. NVivo10 software was used to analyse the interview data. To obtain researcher triangulation, two researchers conducted the interviews and analyzed the data. One researcher started the analysis by openly coding two interviews with a former and a family member. The themes and topics from the interviews provided areas of focus for the researchers during the analysis. The second researcher tried to code the interviews using the same labels, resulting in a more reliable list of open codes. Axial coding was accomplished for further analysis of the journeys into and out of extremism.

Ethics

In the Netherlands, all interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. In Denmark most interviewees would solely participate in the research if no audio recordings were made. In order to guarantee anonymity, all information that could lead to a participant's identity was altered or deleted. Due to the high security profile of our respondents, confidentiality was promised to the participants and none of the interviews was made available to third parties: transcriptions have only been made for scientific purposes. Based on the principle of confidentiality, participants were only included in the definite sample if there was consent. The research received ethical approval from the Faculty Ethics Review Committee of Utrecht [*name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process*] University.

The target groups' stories are varied regarding the background of the formers, the way they came into contact with their ideals, and the manner in which they radicalized and de-radicalized. Nevertheless, it was expected that several stories show recurrent biographical themes or crises that shape the way they perceive their radicalization and de-radicalization processes, and present their narrative about their journeys.⁵²

Results

This section presents the findings from the interviews. As was to be expected, the thirty-four interviews with forty-eight respondents each revealed uniqueness. Therefore, one could argue that the twenty-one cases produced twenty-one answers to the research question. Every story into and out of radicalization is truly unique and there is not one decision or action of which the motives are completely retrievable. Having said that, in both countries a number of pathways can be discerned that cut across adhered ideologies. Overall, three main journeys toward and away from radicalism can be inductively proposed. Grouped by their prevailing leitmotiv, the three most important journeys are: (1) a journey triggered by a problematic family climate; (2) a journey stimulated by the intellectual appeal of a radical milieu; and (3) a journey triggered by a passionate personality. First, the three journeys are demonstrated and illustrated through case studies.

Note that these journeys are ideal types, that is, empirically funded abstractions⁵³ that help us to establish a relationship between data or events that could be left unrelated. It should be highlighted that these journeys have been carved out of a much more detailed and diversified reality. They are in every sense of the word “ideal-typical” journeys, of which a variety of configurations and combinations are to be expected. In real life, elements of the described journeys will interweave.

Journey 1: A Problematic Family Situation

About half of the respondents situate their upbringing in a family context characterized by turbulence and instability. Some families were too busy making ends meet to monitor their children’s activities, others did not succeed in offering the youth the necessary emotional support and boundaries, others lost dear family members to illness or divorce. The youth, often triggered by these events of loss or turmoil, found it hard to cope with the situation, some experienced a lack of authority and/or emotional support (mainly from the father’s side) and consequently turned their back on the family before resorting to an extreme group, where—at first glance—coherent rules and support appear to be much more available. In these biographies, de-radicalization mostly comes with the realization that one’s persona is full of hate and negativity. The everyday violent character of many radical movements becomes unbearable and unlivable. In Journey 1 young people distance themselves from the problems encountered in their original family life. The main force for this move is a push away from the family environment and in this process the political direction seems somewhat secondary.

Take the example of Rowan and Nick. Rowan and Nick had turbulent childhoods while growing up. Their parents divorced when Nick was still a baby and though the children would have preferred to live with their father, they were not allowed to see him. When Rowan was 12 years old, his mother was badly injured in a car crash and had to stay in a rehabilitation center for over a year. At that point Rowan and Nick felt that they had lost contact with their mother definitely and they recall their upbringing as “unrestrained.” Rowan points at his brother: “When he was 13, he only slept at home like three times a week or so.” His brother confirms: “I would just come home at 4 AM.” According to their stepfather, the safety network failed when their mother was injured and that is “where things went wrong”: “If you separate a family consisting of young people in the most vulnerable period of their lives, that leaves its marks. It causes you to look for warmth, for friends, for all these things you don’t have but really need at that age.”

Radicalization

Half a year after the car accident, Rowan moved to the Danish capital to live with his dad. He struggled with the move and Rowan was “in shock”: suddenly he was one of the few White children in his class and he was bullied terribly according to his father. Rowan recalled that he channeled his anger about the move and the bullying in the wrong way, because from that point on, he started to be interested in extreme right-wing ideology. He joined a group of hardcore music fans at his new school and in his residential area he mostly hung out with older right-wing boys whom he wanted to impress. Rowan stated that he wanted to be “the toughest and the most brazen.” As a 13-year-old he did not hide his new ideology: he called himself a national socialist who agitated against Jews, anti-fascists, and race mixing. When he was just 14 years old he started his own skinhead movement with friends.

Rowan’s parents were not restrictive in their upbringing; however, the extreme right-wing ideas were considered unwanted and were banned. Father: “Look, by the time Hitler was painted on the wall in graffiti and the swastika flag came in, yes then I lost it. I ripped it right off the wall and burnt that flag, and I also removed the graffiti from the wall and told him ‘if you start with that, I’ll kick you out and then we’re finished.’”

Major fights followed between Rowan and his father and when Rowan was 15 years old he left the parental home, quit school, and lived in a house with likeminded people. From that moment on he no longer had contact with his parents. According to Rowan, no authorities interfered because “I always managed to withdraw myself from the sight of childcare, compulsory education, probation and after-care services.”

De-Radicalization

Rowan points out that his de-radicalization was a process that took three to four years. For a long time, he had serious doubts about his ideology. Someone gave him books about Marxism, which raised questions regarding his own ideology, until he found National Socialism truly implausible. Moreover, he really liked his brother’s new girlfriend, who came from a migrant background. When the extreme left-wing groups started to notice that Rowan maybe wanted to exit, they started to interfere against Rowan’s will: “they hinted to my movement that I wanted to quit, just to push me to cut the knot.” But according to Rowan he cut the knot by himself because his journey into and out of radicalization was led by *human agency*: “I’ve been influenced by a lot of things but I’ve always thought about everything myself. I’ve always made my own choices I think.”

After we spoke to Rowan about his radicalization and de-radicalization journey, something unexpected occurred: his brother Nick had converted to Islam and joined the *jihād* in Syria. Suddenly the history of radicalization within this family was being repeated.

Journey 2: An Attractive Ideological Environment

While many of the respondents grew up in a challenging family context, one third of the respondents situated their upbringing in a fully functioning family context characterized by stability, emotional support, and clear boundaries. However, they too were one day lured toward an extreme group. The child is often smart and ambitious, but, confronted with

injustice, one may not be able to address their emotions in the institutions they are raised in. They then adopt a radical frame as an alternative framework. The main motivation seems to be the desperate need for justice and purpose in life. So the second journey starts in a family context that is more stable and nourishing than in Journey 1, but somehow does not manage to address the youth's particular feelings of discontent around political topics that relate to injustice.

De-radicalization is mostly triggered by a sudden awareness of hypocrisy and/or boredom. The everyday violence characteristic of many radical movements becomes unbearable and unlivable. Journey 2 describes the transition from ambitious pupil to critical citizen, in which the youth are attracted by alternative frameworks to make sense of the world's insensibilities. Illustrative is Andrew's journey. Andrew is of second-generation Palestinian origin with an Islamic background. He was born and grew up in a larger Dutch city with his parents and younger sister; both parents spoke Dutch and had steady, well-paid middle-class jobs. He was a clever child and did well in school, was popular and happy, and had lots of friends. His parents were "there for him and his sister."

Andrew had always been aware of his eloquence and the ease with which he would usually "win" a discussion—even when discussing grown-up topics with people much older than himself. He was interested in politics, religion, and philosophy and with time, this intellectual drive became an ingrained part of his identity, as a tool to search for meaning and also a way of showing off. He was becoming a "real" teenager. It was at this time, at age 14, he was first acquainted with an extreme Islamic organization.

Radicalization

Through an acquaintance a few years older than Andrew, Andrew was invited to some meetings and introductory "open discussion nights." He went "just to see what it was like," but quite immediately met some very interesting people with the intellectual capacity to discuss even the heaviest topics in a qualified and resourceful way, which triggered Andrew's respect and curiosity. Soon he invested all his time and energy in meeting and debating with his new acquaintances.

During this period, Andrew's parents were well aware what was happening. Dinners at home were often transformed into lectures or inflammatory speeches, where he enthusiastically pontificated on topics like Islam, Christianity, falsification of history, world poverty, and the spirit of capitalism. After a while his sister began to join the meetings too. Later, his mother started to frequent a discussion group for women related to the same extreme Islamic organization.

After just a few years, Andrew was well on his way to the very top of the organization. He felt he got wiser and wiser all the time: "But the horrible thing is—of course—that I wasn't! It was the exact opposite! I had really begun to think in this—system—and it had completely taken over everything I did!"

De-Radicalization

Andrew started university, where he studied theology and Arabic Studies. By reading many books, he started to develop doubts about his organization. The push to deradicalization came 100 percent from within, according to Andrew. It was not something sudden but a

long-coming process: “I had seen it coming for a long time, but tried to keep believing what I had invested so, so much in for so long. But it was impossible. I came to discuss some of these problems and incommensurability’s with my wife. And to my great surprise, she agreed and said that she had had some of the same thoughts herself!”

Andrew and his wife decided to quit their membership and after that day Andrew completely cut off what had been at the center of his life for almost ten years. Today, Andrew is ashamed about his recruitment and in hindsight wished he had not wasted time on the organization. Other respondents, who took Journey 3, however, look back at their radical boyhood more positively as if these experiences were conditional to their social-emotional development: “It was necessary to become who I am now.”

Journey 3: Passionate Personalities

While the majority of respondents seem to be triggered by a problematic family situation or persuaded by radical groups, some interviews reveal a personality attracted to extremes that leads to an extreme political or religious path. From their relatives, it is learned that these young people attracted attention during their childhood. They may grow up in all types of familial contexts as there is no indication that these personalities are triggered by a certain upbringing.

Some are from fairly well off, middle-class nuclear families with resources and a situated place in their respective local communities, although the parent-child relations may not be unproblematic. Many had a need to be at the center stage, obtaining attention, dominating and showing off, intellectually as well as physically.

Coming of age, these children express a need for challenge, excitement and/or focus. Some prove capable of learning almost entire religious or ideological books by heart. However, there comes a moment when these books are no longer sufficient and they become deeply bored and unsatisfied with the content. In Journey 3 young people push boundaries and go to lengths for everything they encounter in an all or nothing lifestyle. The main force is personal character and agency, like in Daniel’s story.

Daniel grew up in Denmark as the youngest son in a Christian family of five. When Daniel was ten years old, his parents divorced. His mother struggled on her own, living on benefits, and taking care of three children. His father struggled as well, being addicted to alcohol. After the divorce, Daniel’s father moved away to a suburb where many migrant families also lived: here, Daniel was introduced to Islam. When he was 13 years old, he converted from Christianity to Islam, as Christianity “did not provide a clear rule of life.”

Daniel sees himself as an *einzelgänger*: someone who did not have many friends and rather spent time by himself playing video games or reading books in his room. However, Islam offered him a sense of meaning and belonging, and helped him to structure his life.

Radicalization

After his conversion to Islam, Daniel started to read a lot of books about his new religion: “Because I was so passionate and wanted to know everything there is to know about Islam, I skipped classes and was reading about Islam all day in my room. I didn’t care anymore about all the rest.”

His mother had no control over him and his father was absent:

“If my father had been there, maybe I could have talked to him. When you’re young, you’re looking for people who are at the same level, who think in similar ways. In the mosque there were peers I could talk to and who knew exactly the way I thought.”

Daniel pinpoints a clear breaking point within his radicalization process. After the 9/11 attacks, when Daniel was 16 years old, he started to look for information on the Internet about the war in Afghanistan. Here, he saw images of the war that he had not seen on the evening news: he was confronted with the injustices that exist in the world. From that moment on he only wanted to find the truth. And “pictures of tortured people in Palestine cannot lie.”

After the deadly terrorist attacks in Madrid, Daniel was banned from his local mosque because they did not want to be associated with the extremist views that Daniel had now developed. After his high school graduation Daniel traveled to Pakistan to join a terrorist training camp. Daniel dreamed of going to Afghanistan to join the *jihad* and fight. Daniel: “if you’re not prepared to die for your ideals, you don’t have ideals.”

Daniel’s sister describes her brother as an extreme personality who always is 100 percent persistent. Her mother tried to talk to Daniel, but he was so convinced of his own truth and so intimidating that his mother was scared to argue. Daniel became so extreme that his mother, brother, and sister decided to move away and break off all contact. In the meantime, Daniel radicalized further and with likeminded people he had met on the Internet, he was planning a terrorist attack. Police interfered and Daniel was arrested and charged with participation in a terrorist organization, then sent to prison.

Deradicalization

Prison has been an important breaking point in the de-radicalization process of Daniel, although this has been a years-long process. Multiple factors helped Daniel to de-radicalize but he emphasizes that it was a fully autonomous process. First, he started to have doubts when considering all the violence in Iraq, like suicide bombings victimizing the local citizens. Second, he believes that his de-radicalization was a matter of ageing: “testosterone levels drop, the aggression lowers, and you become more down to earth, more rational.” The slogans that inflamed him when he was 18 years old simply did not have the same effect on him when he was 24. Third, there was no intellectual challenge left for him in the Quran. He knew the Quran by heart and was no longer challenged by it: “It was yesterday’s knowledge so to say. It was time to open the intellectual window and let in some fresh air.”

He then discovered scientific and philosophical books, to which he “totally got addicted.”

Daniel now feels that Islam is evil and brainwashes people to become hateful. His sister feels that Daniel, again, became quite extreme in his views:

“If Daniel starts something, he immediately has to be extreme. First he was an extreme Muslim and now he is not and he is posting anti-Muslim articles on his Facebook page every day. He’s just not stable and I’m worried about him.”

Analysis

The conversations held with formers and their families help us to (re)construct their pathways into and away from extremism from an insider perspective. Of course, a lot of what we

found is also found in existing literature. Similar to prior research,⁵⁴ a *problematic home situation*, a *search for identity*, and *injustice in the world* were found to be important push factors for driving young people into the arms of extremism. Moreover, as the qualitative data show, factors interact and mesh together in a complex manner that can often be very difficult to disentangle or differentiate in the case of any one person. The nonlinear and complex nature of the radicalization process, then, requires a dynamic mode of analysis. In the journey metaphor, radicalization and de-radicalization are connected as two stages of the same developmental process. Transcending the determination of singular factors, the biographical approach evokes certain insights and impressions rather than fixed variables, let alone causes. The individuals react to a complex situational setting or a sequence of (critical life) events. For example, in the cases of Rowan, Nick, and Daniel it involved dealing with their parents' divorce. In other cases: what sense was made of the illness occurring in the family? In Daniel's case: how was the political situation in which the world reacted? The interviews indicate that, unless these matters and their interactions are properly dealt with, the questions are intensified and raised to an existential level: what does my life mean? How can I claim my place in this society? Who is there not only to console me, but also to offer me an outlook on the world that makes sense? These findings concur with Kruglanski et al., "The quest for personal significance constitutes a major motivational force that may push individuals towards violent extremism. The road to radicalization begins with arousal of the quest for significance. ..."⁵⁵

In this sample, the moment these kinds of fundamental questions were evoked, the first place to look for credible answers was in the traditional institutions, be it the family, the political landscape, or the spiritual organizations. For the far-right formers this was the tradition of their parents' protest groups or their activism with the unions. For the Islamists, the first place to look for answers is in the religion of their parents, an Islamic perspective of the world. In both groups, a very similar dissatisfaction can be seen when it turns out that the traditional answers from their parents or the established institutions fall short of explaining the questions raised. So a common element in these accounts is a troubled search for one's place in society and for the meaning in life, and a great deal of radicalization can be understood as being a result of the young people's disappointment in society's institutions.

The journeys that many respondents took show a succession of certain transitional challenges, exacerbated by unresponsive reactions in their upbringing or from representatives of societal institutions. The interviews reveal stories about a number of social-emotional strategies for coping with troublesome transitions from childhood to adulthood. One of these strategies is, unfortunately, violent radicalization. Although the stories are very different, they nevertheless revolve around common themes like "identity/being somebody," "exclusion," "a sense of belonging," "recognition and understanding," "meaning," and the like. This study thus offers empirical indications that the radicalization process can be characterized as a journey in which the transitional social-emotional tasks of adolescence are ineffectively taken care of.

Regarding the part where people exit radical groups, the case studies show us that disengagement and certainly de-radicalization is usually a process that takes years. Furthermore, it is confirmed that no single factors produce de-radicalization, but multiple factors seem to play a role in the process. Daniel, for example, mentioned his time in prison, coming of age, and discovering scientific and philosophical books as factors influencing his journey away from extremism. In general, young people from Journey 1 (problematic family) were

positively influenced by people outside of the extreme groups, which helped them to exit through material and mental support (rather than via argumentation). People from Journey 2 (attractive ideological environment) often de-radicalized under influence of incarceration, but also maturation and personal human agency were mentioned by this group as a main reason for de-radicalization. This is illustrated by Andrew, who emphasized that his (wish for) de-radicalization came from within. And people from Journey 3 (passionate personality), de-radicalized most often because they lost interest in their extreme ideology and found something new to focus on.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study looked into the most intimate sphere of the radicalization process: the household. The research question inspired a qualitative research study resulting in thirty-four interviews with former radicals and their families from the Netherlands and Denmark, a group that previously had been exceptionally difficult to gain access to. This study shows that the radicalization process can be characterized as a journey marked by a sequence of troubled social-emotional transitions from childhood to adulthood. The concepts of journeys and transitions are helpful in making sense of the radicalization process and fit well with the biographical approach chosen in this study. From the case studies it becomes clear that isolated background variables are not always sufficient for understanding the radicalization process. This may explain why radicalization studies that look for a combination of statistical variables from population databases rarely reveal patterns. As Kralik et al. note: “to further develop understandings, research must extend beyond single events or single responses.”⁵⁶ Speaking of social-emotional transitions through the life course seems to offer opportunities for enhancing knowledge of the radicalization process.

An important implication is that each journey probably implies a different type of support or policy. If a problematic home situation raises social-emotional tension and pushes a young person toward a radical group, one may be best served by mainly practical support with the aim of helping repair the strength of the household. If the family is present but the adolescent is attracted toward an extreme ideology, the focus of support may better shift away from family to the youth themselves, and aim to create alternative channels to direct the emerging political agency and release moral-emotional tension. Both strategies may also be helpful for a passionate personality, but he or she may also benefit from tailor-made psychological counseling.

These interviews show that underneath the radicalization process, there are universal needs that involve navigating the transition from childhood to adulthood. In the data, radicalization emerges as a coping mechanism, as a way to explore the world, as means of resistance, as a manner to ban existential uncertainties, as a way to be guided, as a mode to acquire answers and as a stronghold in difficult times. Moreover, the journey metaphor connects the radicalization and de-radicalization processes as two aspects of the same journey: a rite of passage into and out of a radical group as they are in search of their place in society.

At the same time, there are some limitations that may have influenced the team's ability to effectively answer the research questions. The main limitation concerns generalization of the findings. Only a limited number of interviews was conducted and the research team was not able to speak with every respondent's parents, siblings, peers, or other significant persons. Lifting more general patterns, couplings, and tendencies from qualitative material of this kind is quite possible though, but demands a truly qualitative approach and hermeneutical sensitivity.

“Thick description” was used to give profound details about the participants and settings, so that generalizations to other participants and situations can be carefully made.

Another potential pitfall involves all the respondents who were not included in the research. In a population such as formers, where it was often difficult to locate and obtain consent from potential interviewees to talk with them and their families, there is reason to believe that whoever agreed to participate may represent a less conflicted, more socially well-functioning subgroup than a hypothetical, largely undefined total of formers, a group that is hardly known.

It is clear to see that participants did not necessarily have a coherent set of causes that led to their radicalization. It is important to acknowledge the inconsistencies in their stories, but biographical research shows that lives are not consistent and constructed life narratives represent no single truth. As one member of the research team said about the findings, one should be more sceptical of a story that is entirely coherent than of a story that shows inconsistencies. The data material collected is very heterogeneous. In many ways, the real value of the case studies lies in reading them as unique narratives contextualised on their own terms.

Finally, if this study was to be replicated, it is likely to produce similar results under the same circumstances. Its reliability depends largely on the systematic way in which the data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed so that another person could understand the themes and arrive at similar conclusions. However, given the historicity of the subject, the same circumstances are not expected and will be really hard to reproduce in the future. As this sample contributes to the knowledge of the radical careers of people some ten or fifteen years ago, this knowledge serves our understanding of the past, and cannot easily be extrapolated to the present or future. In this day and age, youth are taking—also literally—different journeys to those taken before, and therefore partly different outcomes from different journeys should be expected from follow-up research into the role of families in more recent forms and shapes of radicalism.

Notes

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3. See Alex S. Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz, “Homegrown Terrorism and Transformative Learning: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding Radicalisation.” Paper presented at the Canadian Political Science Association Conference 2009, University of Ottawa, Canada. Available at <http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2009/wilner-dubouloz.pdf> (accessed 14 February 2015).
4. According to Tinka Veldhuis and Jørgen Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2009).
5. John Horgan, *Walking Away From Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
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9. See, for example, Raphael S. Ezekiel, "An Ethnographer Looks at Neo-Nazi Groups: The Racist Mind Revisited," *American Behavioural Scientist* 46(1) (2002); Fathali Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration," *American Psychologist* 60(2) (2005); Veldhuis and Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation*.
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11. Lloyd DeMause "The Childhood Origins of Terrorism," *Journal of Psychohistory* 29(4) (2002); Ezekiel, "An Ethnographer Looks at Neo-Nazi Groups"; Allard Feddes, Lars Nickolson, and Bert-Jan Doosje, *Triggerfactoren in het radicaliseringsproces* (Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2015); Van der Valk and Wagenaar, *Monitor Racisme & Extremisme*.
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14. Cragin, "Resisting Violent Extremism"; Ezekiel, "An Ethnographer Looks at Neo-Nazi Groups"; Silke, "Holy Warriors."
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16. Gielen, *Radicalisering en identiteit*; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20(3) (2008); Van der Valk and Wagenaar, *Monitor Racisme & Extremisme*.
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22. Rogelio Alonso, "Why Do Terrorists Stop? Analysing Why ETA Member Abandon or Continue with Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34(9) (2011); Tore Bjørge and John Horgan,

- Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Fernando Reinares, "Exit From Terrorism: A Qualitative Empirical Study on Disengagement and Deradicalization Among Members of ETA," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23(5) (2011).
23. Tore Bjørgo, "Dreams and Disillusionment: Engagement in and Disengagement from Militant Extremist Groups," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 55(4) (2011); Reinares, "Exit from Terrorism."
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 25. Alonso, "Why Do Terrorists Stop?"; Bjørgo, "Dreams and Disillusionment"; Reinares, "Exit From Terrorism."
 26. Alonso, "Why Do Terrorists Stop?"
 27. Bjørgo, "Dreams and disillusionment"; Donatella Della Porta, "Leaving Underground Organizations: A Sociological Analysis of The Italian Case," in Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, eds., *Leaving Terrorism Behind* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Reinares, "Exit From Terrorism."
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 30. Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan, "Turning Away From Terrorism."
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 35. Instead of a focus on attempts to profile terrorists Horgan argues that concentrating on the processes of involvement in terrorism is more productive, with a particular focus on three distinct phrases: (1) becoming involved, (2) being involved (seen as involvement with unambiguous terrorist activity), and (3) disengaging (not necessarily involving de-radicalization).
 36. Brian Roberts, *Biographical Research* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002).
 37. Typically focusing on categories of terrorism, anti-democratic discourse, and hate speech. See, for an example related to Islamist extremism, Olivier Roy, "Islamic Terrorist Radicalization in Europe," in Samir Amghar, Amel Boubekeur, Michael Emerson, Chris Allen, eds., *European Islam: Challenges for Public Policy and Society* Brussels (CEPS, 2007), pp 52-60.
 38. In philosophy of science, "etic" categories and descriptions refer to research using a vocabulary produced by scientists and not the objects of research themselves. In contrast, "emic" descriptions refer to sociological and ethnographic virtues of understanding: the study and description of cultural practices from the point of view of the insider, not using an external, scientific vocabulary and categorization.
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41. This term refers to social–emotional tasks, that is, emotions that depend on the actions of other people, such as shame, pride, and envy. It also includes the moral–emotional development of the feelings about righteousness, social justice, and about Good and Evil that often make up a person’s strong ideals.
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46. Stern, *Terror in the name of God*, pp. xviii–xxii.
47. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, p. viii.
48. Gielen, *Radicalisering en identiteit*, p. 133.
49. San, Sieckelinck, and De Winter, “Ideals Adrift.”
50. Stijn Sieckelinck and Doret De Ruyter, “Mad about Ideals? Educating Children to become Reasonably Passionate,” *Educational Theory* 59(2) (2010).
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53. Max Weber, “Basic Sociological Terms,” in Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds., *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).
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55. Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Anna Sheveland, Malkanthi Hetiarachchi, and Rohan Gunaratna, “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism,” *Political Psychology* 35(69) (2014), p. 80.
56. Kralik, Visentin, and Van Loon, “Transition: A Literature Review,” p. 327. er moeten we denk ik nog iets meed from a grounded theory perspectiveuld lead to radicalization and de-radicalization. ind. Di Debbie Kralik, Kate Visentin, and Antonia van Loon, “Transition: A Literature Review.” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 55(3) (2006).

Appendix

Topiclist Formers and Family—FORMERS

Age

Occupation

Married/single

With/without children

Ideals

Which ideals/ideology?

When was the first time you came into contact with these ideals?

How? Any role model?

What was so appealing about these ideals?
 How did these ideals develop?
 How come you became so involved?
 How far were you willing to go, to fulfill your ideals?

Household

In what kind of household did you grow up?
 – facts: one/two parents; siblings; living standard; neighbourhood
 – feelings: comfort; happy?; religious/spiritual?
 Before you got radical, would you say your family life was on the right track?

Parent(s)

Did your parent(s) know about your passion for these ideals?
 Their (his/her) opinion? Their (his/her) reaction?
 Did you discuss your ideals with your parents?
 Where did your parent(s) draw the line?
 Did you keep in contact with them?
 How was your relationship with them (him/her) during your “radicalized” period?
 Ideals parent(s)?
 With what ideals were you raised by your parent(s)? How did they expect you to become?
 If you were a parent, how would you react upon your child’s ideals or radicalization?/Now you are a parent, how do you react ...

Upbringing

Attachment → How was the relationship with your parents? Did you spend a lot of time together?
 Support → Could you talk to your parents about problems, worries, uncertainties?
 Control → Did you normally tell your parents about your whereabouts? Did friends visit you at your house? Did your parents know, who your friends were? Were your parents at home a lot?
 Rules and regulations → Did you find your parents strict? Or easy? Were there many rules at your house? What kind of rules?

Deradicalization

When did you start changing your mind?
 How did you become less radical/less engaged?
 How did you experience this process? How long did it take?
 Who was the most important person, influencing your route back?

Family

How did your parents, and other family members, react upon you becoming less radical/engaged?
 Did this process change your relationship with your parents? In what way?
 What kind of support did they offer you during this process? (emotional, practical, etc.)
 What role did this support play in your deradicalization?

Safety net

Did you or your parents seek professional help?
 Were you offered any professional help during your process of radicalization- and/or deradicalization?
 How did you experience this (lack of) support?

Were there any others who have supported you during your deradicalization or disengagement?

What role did this support play in your decision to disengage?

Topiclist Formers and Family—FAMILY (parents)

Family composition

Father/mother?

Married/divorced?

Brothers/sisters?

Ideals

How would you describe X?

What kind of ideals did X have?

What did you think of these ideals?

When was the first time, according to you, that X got involved in these ideals?

– How did you notice?

– How did you respond?

Why do you think that X was pulled so strongly towards these ideals?

Did X have an example/a charismatic person he looked up to?

Household

In what kind of household did X grow up?

– facts: one/two parents; siblings; living standard; neighbourhood

– feelings: comfort; happy? spiritual needs?

Was there any support from outside? (family/government/community)

Before X got radical, was your family life on the right track?

Relationships

What was X like as a child?

How would you describe your relationship with X when he/she was younger?

How would you describe your relationship during his/her radical period? Did you keep contact?

How would you describe your relationship with X at the moment?

Did you talk to X about his/her ideas?

Setting boundaries

Would you describe yourself to be a strict or a permissive parent back then?

Did you feel that X could possibly go too far in fulfilling his/her ideals?

Did you ever try to divert X from his/her ideas? How?

Where did you draw a line? What was X not allowed to do? Did you share this with X?

How did he/she respond to your objections?

Support and advice

Did you ever ask anyone for help during the radicalization process of your child? (family, professionals)

Did you receive help? What kind of help?

Did this support help you?

What kind of support would you have liked to receive?

Control

Did X spend a lot of time on the internet?

Did you know what occupied him/her on the internet?

Did you talk about what he/she did on the internet? Did you talk about the content of his/her search?

Were there house rules on internet use?

Did you know with whom X was befriended/ interacted with? Did they ever come to your house?

Did you ever join X to an “ideal related gathering”?

Deradicalization

How did X’s deradicalization/disengagement take place?

How did you experience this process?

Did this process change your relationship with X? In what way?

Could you offer any kind of support during the deradicalization/disengagement? What kind of help? (emotional, practical, etc.)

What role did this support play in the deradicalization/disengagement?

Finally, what would you advise parents who have a child that pursues extreme ideals?

Topiclist Formers and Family—FAMILY (siblings)

Family composition

Father/mother?

Married/divorced?

Brothers/sisters?

Ideals

How would you describe X?

What kind of ideals did X have?

What did you think of these ideals?

When was the first time, according to you, that X got involved in these ideals?

– How did you notice?

– How did you respond? How did your parents respond?

Why do you think that X was pulled so strongly towards these ideals?

Did X have an example? Someone he/she knew?

Relationships

What was X like as a child?

How would you describe your relationship with X when he/she was younger?

How would you describe your relationship during his/her radical period? Did you keep contact?

How would you describe your relationship with X at the moment?

Did you talk to X about his/her ideas?

Setting boundaries

Would you describe your parents to be strict or permissive?

Did you feel that X could possibly go too far in fulfilling his/her ideals?

Did you ever try to divert X from his/her ideas? How?

Where did your parents draw a line? How did he/she responded to their objections?

Support and advice

Did your parents ever ask anyone for help during the radicalization process of your brother/sister? (family, professionals)

Did they receive help? What kind of help?

Did this support help?

What kind of support would you have liked to receive?

Control

Did X spend a lot of time on the internet?

Did you know what occupied him/her on the internet?

Did you talk about what he/she did on the internet? Did you talk about the content of his/her search?

Were there house rules on internet use?

Did you know with whom X was befriended/interacted with? Did they ever come to your house?

Did you ever join X an “ideal related gathering”?

Deradicalization

How did the deradicalization take place?

How did you experience the deradicalization process?

Did the deradicalization process change your relationship with X? In what way?

Could you offer any kind of support during the deradicalization? What kind of help? (emotional, practical, etc.)

What role did this support play in the deradicalization?

Finally, what would be your advice to people who have a family member that pursues extreme ideals?