Exploring the Pathway from Radicalisation to Disengagement – Comparison of Dissonances Experienced by a Jihadi Foreign Fighter and a Right-Wing Extremist

Miryam ESER DAVOLIO[1], Carole VILLIGER[2]

ZHAW Soziale Arbeit

Abstract

The aim of our article is to analyse the disengagement process of a Swiss returnee from Syria and the emergence of dissonances during his involvement with the Islamic State (IS) and to compare this evolution to the pathway of a right-wing extremist willing to leave the violent extremist group Blood & Honour. Although the contexts of these extremist groups are very different, a number of elements – as the ideology based on hate, the groups' internal pressure and the affinity for violence – are quite similar. The disengagement process of both extremists is analysed by means of reconstructive methods and the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), as well as by the current state of research on disengagement processes. This serves as a theoretical framework. The findings show that comparing their pathway to defection reveals a number of parallels: the experiences within the extremist groups, especially violent acts against group members, increased their dissonances and provided a trigger to an opening process and ultimately the attempt to opt out of the group.

Keywords: jihadist radicalisation, right-wing extremism, cognitive dissonance, disengagement

Introduction

Focussing on individual disengagement processes in this article, we have to consider that the interest in *political violence* within the social sciences has waned over the last few years, giving way to analyses of *radicalisation processes*. Research into *extremism*, which includes questions about various aspects of radicalisation, entails an analysis of the political and social dynamics and a consideration of the political significance of this phenomenon. Besides, the processes by which an individual becomes radicalised are highly complex (Crettiez 2008; Villiger 2017). To

---

[1] Prof. Dr. Miryam Eser Davolio is a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Social Work, University of Applied Sciences Zurich (eser@zhaw.ch)

[2] Dr. Carole Villiger is a lecturer at the Swiss Distance University and visiting lecturer at the Universities of Fribourg and Neuchâtel.

understand what drives a person to a point where they are ready to resort to violence at any given time, we need to look not only at the historical conditions of each conflict in its totality, but also at the circumstances particular to each territory and the way in which an individual relates to those circumstances.

Disengagements have to be understood in the light of the motivation leading to radicalisation. According to Horgan (2009: 152), radicalisation is "a social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology". Right-wing extremism and jihadist extremism are of course very different forms of radicalisation due to the political, historical and cultural background, but there are a number of parallels with regard to their ideological concepts (Ebner 2018; Eser Davolio/Lenzo 2017). Right-wing extremism is based on ideological convictions of inequality combined with the readiness to fight against the structure of the political system and against the organization of social coexistence (Heitmeyer/Hagan 2003). Jihadist extremism can be defined as a religious-political ideology that legitimises violence against so-called unbelievers. Both forms of extremism proclaim the superiority of one's own group and the dehumanization of the 'inferior' other group, which means that both forms are based on *group-focused enmity* toward those who are religiously or ethnically different or *deviant* from one's own standpoint.

Disengagement is a process of distancing and departure from extremism. Often it is a long-term continuous process. The term *disengagement* comprises both a psychological and a behavioural component. *Psychological disengagement* refers to a shift on the cognitive level, in attitude or belief (Horgan 2009), and is based on reflection, criticism of extremist ideas and/or extremist exponents or group members, but can also consist in an opportunistic decision to avoid repression and punishment. In the context of extremism, the term *deradicalisation* is a synonym for psychological disengagement. *Deradicalisation* refers to a systematic moderation of radical thoughts, including the process of an individual becoming more open to alternative viewpoints (Dechesne 2011). In contrast, *behavioural disengagement* means the reduction or stop of the physical involvement in violent or extremist activities. Such a change process, as to quit a radical group or to avoid violent action, can be motivated by the refusal of violence or also just for the sake of personal convenience (for example, for fear of losing one's job). For this reason, it is fundamental to analyse and question disengagement very accurately and to differentiate dimensions and degrees of disengagement.

The process of disengagement and the development of an alternative identity are as complex as the initial radicalisation process (Christensen 2015) and can involve a high level of stress on the emotional level as well as substantial elaboration and reflection on the cognitive level.

In the framework of this article, we use the term *disengagement* rather than *deradicalisation* because the psychological dimension has not been assessed. We focus on the reasons for dissonances caused by cognitive shifts, which can lead to increasing criticism and an opening process and as a final consequence, to leaving the extremist group.

Theoretical aspects: The concept of *radicalisation*

According to McCauley and Moskalenko (2011: 4), radicalisation is the "development of beliefs, feelings and actions in support of any group or cause in conflict". In line with Ongering's (2007:

3) definition of radicalisation as "a process of personal development whereby an individual adopts ever more extreme political or politico-religious ideas and goals, becoming convinced that the attainment of these goals justifies extreme methods", we regard radicalisation as the holding of extreme politico-religious views coupled with the legitimation of violence.

The word *radical* points in the direction of 'extremist' attitudes and stands in opposition to *moderate*. It indicates "a relative position on a continuum of organised opinion" (Sedgwick 2010: 481). In contrast to activism, radicalism is understood as readiness to engage in illegal and violent political action (Sedgwick 2010: 483). Kundnani (2012) argues for a focus on radical jihadism as a political movement, thus shifting attention away from individuals and their deficits and toward groups. In this sense, it is crucial to understand what stimulates the processes that drive young people towards jihadist radicalisation and which worldviews, experiences, needs and problems act as push – and pull factors on the path of radicalisation.

As has been shown in other studies, jihadists do not fit a 'typical profile' (Steinberg 2015; Heinke/Persson 2015), but are highly heterogeneous in terms of their social background, education, socio-economic status, etc. (Eser Davolio et al. 2015). This is also the case for right-wing extremists in Switzerland, as their backgrounds are heterogeneous and they are often socially well integrated (Eser Davolio/Drilling 2008).

Although some people involved with radical groups are unstable (Roy 2015), it would nevertheless be false to see jihadist radicalisation as a problem of personal deficits – or solely as social or cultural problems (Schiffauer 2000: 315). Wiktorowicz (2004) points out the importance of social influence in leading a person to join a radicalised group. Based on his fieldwork he describes the process of radicalisation as a transition from cognitive openness (receptivity to new ideas and world views) towards a frame alignment and the socialisation in the extremist group, which facilitates indoctrination, identity construction and value changes. Especially in small groups under isolation and threat, the pressure for behavioural compliance and value consensus increases to reach a high level of cohesion (McCauley/Moskalenko 2011).

Radicalisation and attitude change

Building on the findings of social psychology on cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), situations involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviours produce a feeling of discomfort and therefore generate an alteration in attitudes, beliefs or behaviour to restore a balance. Consequently, there is an inner drive to hold our attitudes and beliefs in harmony and to avoid dissonances. The consistency of attitudes, influence and attitude change, information elaboration and dissonances in radicalisation processes can be understood as an individual's need to experience a world that is both integrated and meaningful. The concept of cognitive dissonance explains the disorienting process of restructuring ideas and values, which are closely tied up with identity issues and life choices such as radicalisation and disengagement (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2013). Disengagement often starts with increasing dissonances and stress caused by the acknowledgement of incongruent information and feelings.

The pathway to joining an extremist group is linked to typical marginalisation processes, such as the creation of alternative worlds of meaning and belief and the propagation of a black-and-white world view, which can lead to a loss of reality and an undifferentiated perception of differing opinions (Waldmann 2011: 237).

Guadagno et. al. (2010) explain this phenomenon by a process of gradual involvement, starting with online communication and a subsequent enhancement of the dimension of commitment to radical convictions. At the same time, radical groups connect individuals with other supporters and facilitate friendships. In this way, they enhance the salience of social identity, and this group membership can in turn amplify the influence of their ideology and recruitment. Zick and Böckler (2015: 10) speak about collective self-conceptualisation through in-group/out-group differentiation, stereotyping and the idea of an enemy that has to be eliminated.

Another analysis based on the categories of social psychology involving various dissonances, social identity and in-group/out-group differentiation can be carried out by adapting the model of radicalisation of Eckert (2009). He specifies seven levels of radicalisation, starting with the cultural definition of collectives (1), the perception of deprivation and injustice (2), combined with the promise of unambiguous clarity through collective identity (3). The influence of events of violence can create a generalisation of conflicts and processes that results in solidarity (4), which leads to meaningfulness through dichotomy, the promise of salvation (5). Finally, the victimisation ideology promotes further solidarity with the collective (6) and the consolidation through fear and hate (7) (Eckert 2009: 5). Consequently, the proclamation of two antagonist groups, victims and perpetrators, connected with emotions of humiliation and threat and the perceived need of self-defence, lead to the readiness to violence (Glaser 2015: 6).

Disengagement

It would exceed the scope of this article to give an overview of the state of current research regarding disengagement as a whole. Therefore, the three studies presented in the following are chosen in order to permit a search for analogies and differences. Only the first study (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2013) deals with all types of extremism, while the others (Neumann 2015; Speckhard/Yayla 2015) address only jihadist disengagement.

Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013) analysed primary interviews[3] on voluntary exit and disengagement from violent extremism in a Western context (N=216), with special regard to cognitive dissonances. She found three clusters of narratives: the first cluster is termed "losing faith in the militant ideology" (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2013: 4), subsuming radicalised individuals who become disillusioned and question the division into *us* and *them*. The second cluster, "group and leadership failure" (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2013: 7-8), entails the dimension of ideals clashing with reality and the fact that the radicalised individuals felt ill-treated by fellow extremists and leaders. The third cluster, "personal and practical circumstances" (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2013: 10-11), consists of a wide range of motives, as for example the feeling of burnout, the failure of the extremist goals, or the experience of repression and legal prosecution. Such motives can push individuals to a gradual process of disillusionment, while others "experience a moment of reckoning triggered by a specific situation or incident where they feel let down or ill treated by fellow extremists or leaders" (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2013: 8).

In his work on the narratives of jihadist returnees from Syria to the UK who spoke publicly about their disengagement, Neumann (2015) has shown that recruitment narratives, with their

---

[3] Review of published studies in the period January 1990 to April 2012.

justifications and incentives, can be grouped into three categories. The most prominent narrative he found were the Syrian conflict and the atrocities of the Assad regime leading to recruitment; the second narrative focuses on faith and the ideology of IS as an ideal state; the third concerns attractive promises like material goods, brotherhood, and adventure. Neumann states that the last category, that of attractive promises, creates a contradiction as they join an organisation that denies selfish desires (Neumann 2015: 9). This can become a first dissonance, emerging upon arrival in Syria. The narratives about defection focus primarily on infighting (against other Sunni rebels) and the brutality against other Muslims, corruption and un-Islamic behaviour, and finally the quality of life, including the experience of combat (Neumann 2015: 11). Another study on IS defectors has shown that emerging dissonances were caused by brutal practices, disgust over the slave trade or the observation of hypocrisy; these led to the perception of a discrepancy between the words and the deeds of IS (Speckhard/Yayla 2015). One might suppose that such dissonances do not arise in individuals who join IS in search of strong emotional experiences and brutality.

From these clusters of narratives follows that there is a wide range of motives that potentially lead to fundamental cognitive dissonances and revisions of extremist commitment, once those radicalised admit to themselves that they have been misguided (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2013: 107).

Research design and methodology

The aim of this article is to explore the pathway of radicalisation and disengagement of a right-wing extremist and a jihadist extremist in order to answer the following questions:
1. What facts and reflections led to the radicalisation of the two individuals, and later on to their disengagement and turning away from extremist convictions and behaviour?
2. Why and when did they realise that what they perceived in the extremist group did not coincide with their original objectives?
3. What kind of parallels and differences can be observed in the comparison of the radicalisation and disengagement process in this case study of a right-wing extremist and a jihadist extremist?

The narratives of the two extremists will be analysed using reconstructive methods in looking at differences and analogies of their pathway to defection. Following Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, contradictions as well as cognitive and emotive dissonances play a particularly important role in the process of leaving the ranks of an extremist group because they force the individual to re-elaborate convictions and beliefs in order to overcome the gap between expectations and reality.

We will analyse such processes by comparing two narrative interviews with former extremists: first, as part of a study carried out in February 2009 in Liechtenstein, we interviewed a young right-wing extremist while he was attempting to defect from Blood & Honour[4] (Eser Davolio/Drilling 2009); second, during an exploratory study on jihadist radicalisation in Switzerland (Eser Davolio et al. 2015) in 2015, we conducted a narrative interview with a "returnee"

---

[4] Blood & Honour is a violent right-wing extremist group created at the end of the '80s with ca. 10,000 members all over the world.

who had been involved with IS in 2014. The interview with the right-wing extremist was conducted in German, the one with the jihadist returnee in French; quotes from both interviews have been translated into English. Both interviews were semi-structured but gave the interviewees space to talk about their experiences, asking them for further clarification from time to time. The questions explored their motivation to become a member of an extremist group, their experiences within the group with special regard to violent acts, the first moment of emerging doubts, increasing dissonances with the extremist convictions/ideology and the pathway out of the extremist group. Tracking the two former extremists and obtaining their consent for an interview was a quite difficult task and required confidentiality and strict data protection to safeguard their anonymity. In both interviews, the main focus of the reconstructive analysis was on the understanding of the radicalisation process, the emerging dissonances and the shift towards disengagement. However, the two studies present numerous relevant differences regarding the form of extremism, the period, the geographical and geopolitical context (extremism abroad vs. home-grown extremism), and on the individual level (age, social background). This makes it very demanding to compare the two cases. The challenge is to find comparable elements. The analysis is explorative in character and therefore does not claim to generate generalizable results.

The returnee from Syria will be called R. When we conducted the interview, R. had just turned 31 and returned from Syria, where he had stayed with Islamic State (IS) from December 2013 until March 2014. R. comes from a Swiss wealthy, upper-middle-class and Christian secular family.[5] The right-wing extremist, called E., was 17 years old, had found a job on a construction site and came from a broken lower-class family. The two interviewees clearly differ in age and in political and ideological attitudes. Their extremist activities brought them to the point of joining together with other extremists abroad: R. chose to leave for Syria to reach the territories controlled by IS, while E. joined Blood & Honour sections in Switzerland, Germany, Austria and South Tyrol to engage in violent actions, but without changing his place of residence or the centre of his life. Both young men were disposed to tell their stories in the context of scientific research although they knew about the risks of exposure that even anonymised interviews posed. The interview gave them the opportunity to reflect about their own process and – as they both declared – contributed to a learning process, which could prevent others from becoming radicalised in the future. The two interviewed men have to be viewed as single cases - even more so as such interviews with defectors are quite singular.

In this article, we adopt a reconstructive approach to understand the radicalisation and disengagement processes of R. and E. based on the interview material. According to Rosenthal (2005), we have to consider that biographical narrative interviews are constructed in the present, that there is a difference between present and past perspectives, and that the present perspective is influenced by social desirability. We reconstructed the structure of self-presentation and their pathway of radicalisation. Then, we compared their narratives to gain some understanding regarding the reasons that influenced their disengagement from the group, with spe-

---

[5] As the data of the Federal Intelligence Service (FIS) show (Eser Davolio et al. 2015), Swiss jihadi travellers are very heterogeneous regarding their educational level and social background, but there is one very common characteristic: almost all (Muslim and converts) come from secular families.

cial regard to dissonances between their expectations or convictions and the perception of reality in the extremist group, changing over time. Additionally, their self-presentation and its plausibility have to be questioned.

The dissonances experienced by a right-wing extremist

The young man E. (aged 17) had been active in right-wing extremist groups since he was 13 and had been a member of Blood & Honour for two years. He had a difficult childhood, problems at school and often felt like a victim and an outsider, until he found that his extremist outfit and membership made him "respected" and feared by his peers. As his appearance made it difficult for him to find a job, he changed his hair and clothes to get a job in the construction industry, where he was working mainly with foreign construction workers. They were initially scared of him, but eventually a more positive relationship developed.

Speaking about the beginning with the right-wing extremist group, E. emphasised the impact this involvement had on his self-esteem and the respect or even fear he provoked in his peers. Before, he had often been teased and bullied by his classmates; the right-wing extremists offered him protection – for a price he did not know at the time.

> *Yes, that was simply a beautiful feeling, see, because before, well they taunted you. But now, no one dared to, they evade you and walk the other way. Not only because I was on the right, but because they'd heard a helluvalot about all the stuff I'd been doing.*[6]

He claimed that he did not know much about the extremist group before joining them or that it would be that much more difficult to quit them. As he was afraid of revenge and pressure, he tried to quit the group slowly, without arousing their attention. This fear was motivated by his experience of the violent punishment of a former opt-out from this extremist group:

> *Because, stupidly, I had contact with Blood & Honour and I know someone here who was with them and he told them that he was quitting, and so they persecuted him.*

He had found friends when he joined the extremist group, but looking back at the time of the interview, he had doubts regarding these friendships:

> *Because they're nice in the beginning. Yeah, then they care about you, until you can no longer get out. And then nobody cares about you anymore.*

He has frequently experienced violent acts toward group members, which was difficult to integrate; also he realised that such violence could happen to him, too: "Yeah, that was also a reason I wanted to get out. First everybody is friends, and then someone gets treated so nasty, treated with feet and fists." Furthermore, he realised that 'simple members' were manipulated and used by the ideological head of the extremist organisation to carry out violent acts with all their legal consequences:

---

[6] This and the following quotes are from the interview with E., 26 Feb 2009.

You gotta say, well, Blood & Honour is more in the background, see, it's like with the boss and the workers. There's these higher up guys and they lean back while the others, the workers, are at the front and pile up a criminal record and serve time. That's like the bishops in chess. And they make all the plans and also get money for doing that […].

Looking back, he recognized that they took high risks for senseless violent acts, just because they felt provoked "because someone gave you a weird look."

In Blood & Honour, the difference is – well, these guys on the right are just about beating one another up, but with them, it's about disabling or killing somebody, not like just about punching.

He reports that he felt afflicted when he assisted with violent acts, but at the same time powerless, because he did not find the courage to intervene: "Yeah, like when you just stand there and see someone lying on the ground, with rivers of blood [...]".

He regarded his knowledge of serious violations as an ace up his sleeve, as means of protection. Should Blood & Honour discover his intention to leave, he could denounce them to the police. As our interview shows, dissonances arose when he felt instrumentalised and could not condone the violent group rules any more, or realised that the violence could turn against him. At the same time, his new friendships with the foreigners at work were an alternative to his extremist peers, allowing him to establish a new context outside his former group identity, which he had to hide to avoid giving the extremist group cause for distrust. As the group members exercised a high level of social control, he had to be very careful and conscious about how to behave and which moves to make. He had to suppress his doubts in order to get out of the extremist sphere step by step, inconspicuously and unnoticed. Nevertheless, he was involved in violent group activities, which he avoided mentioning in the interview, describing such extreme acts only as an outsider, without assuming responsibility.

The dissonances experienced by a returnee from Syria

His motivation to join Islamic State and his involvement were two aspects that specifically led R. to later change his mind about the group. The reasons that led him to affiliate with IS are many-faceted. By his own account, the most important factor was the bewilderment at the massacre of the Syrian population by their leader Bashar al-Assad. R.'s intention was to make a photo report about the situation on the ground a form of eyewitness account: "I did not want to stand idly by in Switzerland while a real carnage was taking place over there!"[7] Another motivation of R. was his desire to go paragliding in Syria, as he was excited by the idea of paragliding in an unlikely and risky place. These incentives indicate humanitarian goals, the need for social recognition and an urge to experience strong emotions. R.'s support for IS is not entirely surprising, given his previous experience: he had previously been interested in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and had made several trips to the occupied Palestinian territories from 2007 onwards, volunteering as an ambulance driver for the Red Crescent; an experience he described

---

[7] This and the following quotes are from the interview with R., 9 Feb. 2015.

as very powerful. During these trips, he experienced several situations of harm, discrimination and violence towards Palestinians caused by Israeli soldiers. This provoked a sense of solidarity and identification with the Palestinian cause in him.

R. converted to Islam in March 2013, well before his departure to Syria in December 2013. According to him, when he converted he had not yet thought of going to Syria: "My conversion was related to a personal interest in Muslim culture." Conversion can offer an "orderly and simplified worldview and it enables previous role expectations to be jettisoned and radical new roles to be adopted" (Gooren 2007: 351). The new social networks, which are able to establish stronger ties than any previous relationships, also play an important role in this process. In the case of R., his new peers encouraged him or at least did not oppose his intention to leave for Syria. Given the stigmatisation of Islam in Switzerland, the conversion to Islam may constitute identification with those who are marginalised (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999: 64). This is also referred to as the "inversion of stigma" (Cesari 2004: 28), and can in extreme cases result in dropping out of the dominant society. In the case of R., who had been socialised in a well-off Swiss family, the conversion also constituted a social shift.

The conversion made him vulnerable to the efforts of the recruiter, who tried to utilise his need for affiliation and sense of religious duty:

> *I was a convert to Islam and my contact in Syria made me understand that it was the duty of every good Muslim to help his brothers. If I did not, I was somehow no more worthy to be part of the Muslim community. I wanted to honour my involvement in the community.*

At the end of 2013, when R. decided to go to Syria, he was in a difficult situation: unskilled, unemployed and unable to move after a parachute accident. He spent much of his time on social networks and he came into contact with recruiters via Facebook. Things then started happening very quickly and he set out on his journey a few months later.

During his trip via Lyon, he encountered other young French men travelling to Syria to engage in combat. Listening to their motivation for *jihad* he felt alienated, as it differed from his own motives:

> *When I spoke to them, I realized that in their point of view, I was really too moderate […]. That night, I did not feel well. I was very anxious. I had doubts and I sensed that I could not go back. I felt caught up in a confusion in which I no longer had any control, like a truck skidding on the ice and sliding into a ravine […]. While we were talking to each other, they made me realise that I was too moderate and I felt very alienated from the group.*

Travelling first to Turkey and subsequently to the Syrian border, not having yet chosen the organization he wanted to join, the traffickers promoted Al Qaida and IS, strongly encouraging him to choose IS. It seems that his decision to join IS was rather a non-decision.[8] As soon as he found himself accepted by IS, he had to hand over his passport, money and all his belongings

---

[8] It is certain that the context of the interview at the beginning of 2015 played an important role in R.'s discourse. When we met him, R. was probably under the control of the security services of Switzerland (he had just been judged), and as he wanted to portray himself as a victim, he therefore minimized his choices.

to the IS traffickers. He did not receive any information about his location, and he was transported from one place to another without any evident logic. He reported that he felt manipulated and unable to escape.

When he arrived in the training camp in Raqqa, he realised that his intentions did not match those of the others, and he refused to take up arms:

> *Most people who were there wanted to die as martyrs. They truly believed that they would go to Heaven. We had the choice between dying as martyrs or fighters, but those who wanted to fight had to do it with Kalashnikovs, without bullet-proof vests and without helmets, so it meant death within a more-or-less short span of time. I did not want to die, so I refused to train. Then I was assigned as a guard and took care of those who were wounded.*

When he talked about martyrdom, it became evident that he still did not believe in Paradise as a reward for fighting the "good cause". Since he was unable to cope with the reality of war and realised that the young soldiers, with inappropriate equipment and weapons, were just being exploited as cannon fodder, he announced his determination to return to Switzerland:

> *I realised that the group in which I was integrated was not fighting against Bashar but wanted simply to kill non-Muslims. It killed civilians, which is contrary to Islam and especially to my personal values. It was madness! It was not at all what I wanted. It terrified me. So I decided to go back home.*

Obviously, he felt alienated by the violence against civilians and could not accept it as compatible with his values and the values of Islam. Consequently, this generated a fundamental and unbearable dissonance.

He said that IS at first accepted his change of mind, but that when they found a walkie-talkie in his luggage, they suspected him of being a spy and put him in prison. R. remained in detention for 54 days before being released. He was treated badly during that time and witnessed the inhumane abuse of adults and children, the appalling hygiene and hunger.

One night in spring 2015, R. left for Turkey, journeying on foot. He called his family, who helped him return to Switzerland. Switzerland accepted his homecoming, but at that time, he had never considered that Switzerland might refuse to accept him.[9]

When we interviewed him, R. viewed himself as a victim of IS, which he now considers equivalent to a sect: "I see myself as a victim of a system that crushes the will of the people." This understanding of events simplifies the complex and multifactorial phenomenon of high-risk engagement. Perceiving oneself as a victim of manipulation also reduces the responsibility of one's own choices, while projecting it on IS.

Although R.'s story has much in common with that of other jihadist-motivated travellers to conflict zones (Neumann 2015; Speckhard/Yayla 2015) – such as the stages of his radicalisation

---

[9] R. refers to France that refused the «returnees» and let them in jail in Turkey, Syria and Iraq. On his return to Switzerland, R. was indicted by the Swiss government for participating in a criminal organisation (Art. 260ter SCC) and for completing military service in a foreign army (Art. 94 MCC). He was sentenced to 200 hours of community service, to do a photo report for peace and mandatory psychotherapy.

process, the role of social media, his social and mental fragility, his perception and interpretation of political factors –, it nevertheless remains his own personal experience. Consequently, it would be hazardous to derive sociological indicators from this one individual case for use in devising a system for the detection and analysis of radicalisation processes.

Comparing the two case studies

It appears necessary to examine each case of radicalisation individually, to clarify their motivations and to understand their process of joining and leaving an extremist group, in order to get a glimpse into their process of self-reflection (Lister 2015). The steps of radicalisation we can observe in the two interviews are not always consecutive, but sometimes overlapping.

Overcoming individual weakness by adhering to a violent extremist group

Both young men have experienced situations of weakness and impotence in their past; E. in connection with the bullying by his schoolmates, and R. confronted with Israeli soldiers at the border as an ambulance driver for Palestinians. Of course, these two experiences are quite different, but when they talked about these situations, they expressed the feeling of impotence and humiliation they experienced. The insecurity in social relationships enhanced the need to be part of something powerful. The disrespect they experienced made the membership with a very violent group even more attractive in their quest for recognition: they became distinct and visible by joining an extremist group which is feared by everyone. This self-positioning is experienced as an identity-stabilising process of self-reassurance (Gabriel 2009). Frank and Glaser (2018) describe such processes of radicalised youths as an attempt to solve a circumstance-specific problem or challenge that the young people involved perceive as functional.

Sliding into extremism – casual opportunities, peers and recruitment

Important for the beginning of R.'s radicalisation was the element of anger over the cruelties committed by the Assad regime. This corresponds to a relevant narrative noted by Neumann (2015). After his conversion to Islam, the recruiter was able to appeal to his sense of commitment for "his brothers". E. joined Blood & Honour instead of overcoming his perception of deprivation and weakness, and was attracted by promises of clarity through collective identity, which corresponds to the steps of radicalisation as discussed by Eckert (2009). Finding their way into this context means that by shedding aspects of their past, hey cast off their previous identities and become immersed, step by step, ever deeper into the extremist milieu and become part of a 'gang' that is connected by shared convictions but also by violent, illegal actions. Viewed from an external position, the decision to join such a violent group may appear irrational, as the two young men in these cases had not shown any proclivity for such explicit violent behaviour before becoming radicalised. But such 'irrational motivation' as perceived from an external viewpoint seems to be quite frequent when looking at a range of different cases of radicalisation (Eser Davolio 2017). Once they enter the inner circle of the extremist group, they are obliged to be coherent and adapt as group members. They both seemed unaware of the violence inside the respective extremist group and were shocked at the cruel measures adopted even

against group members denounced as 'traitors'. To make an example of supposed traitors serves as a lesson for group members to remember the risks of deviation, and commits them ever more strongly to the extremist group and its aims. Although the two men had sought to adapt to and participate in extremist group life, they felt an inner dissonance when they observed acts of violence against group members, doubting the correctness of such punishments and realising that they could too become a victim of such violent acts at some point.

The desire for a feeling of belonging and the sense of duty

Both young men did not appear to be critical in the beginning and became involved quite readily. In the interview situation, they both tried to excuse their naivety by pointing out that they did not take into account possible risks and their instrumentalisation. While they did understand the dangers inherent in violent activities, their desire to belong to a group and to participate in it still bounds them to the extremist cadre. E. explicitly felt maltreated by the leaders. This kind of disillusion corresponds with the narrative cluster "group and leadership failure" of Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013). Furthermore, violent and illegal acts binds followers to the group. The recruiter of R. appealed to his sense of duty to assist his Muslim brothers in war and obliged him as a devout convert to prove his loyalty and his commitment to the cause. According to Eckert (2009), victimisation ideology promotes solidarity with the collective – and R.'s recruiter specifically employed that mechanism.

Comparing one's own convictions to those of the others – noticing differences and alienation from the group

The process of information elaboration within extremist propaganda and the alignment with its ideology is a gradual one, not only supported by the media and recruiters (Eser Davolio et al. 2017), but also by the members of the in-group. Both ex-extremists compared their beliefs to the convictions of other group members and noticed some differences but did not want others to become aware of their differing attitudes. Sharing similar convictions and experiencing camaraderie can enhance the sense of belonging and commitment. Once they began to acknowledge contradictions and incoherencies inside their extremist group, they at first avoided the elaboration of such dissonances; but as they continued, they experienced such contradictions repeatedly, and this made it difficult for them to retain their belief in the extremist ideology. They both stated a discrepancy between the words and the deeds of the extremist group (see also Speckhard/Yayla 2015). This awakens criticism (Horgan 2007), and the result is an opening process allowing to question the experienced reality of the extremist group (Dechesne 2011); a process which they could no longer avoid. Moreover, the contradictions experienced within the extremist group paired with new contextual factors can have a boosting effect: the young right-wing extremist developed new contacts with foreign employees at the work site, and these encounters served to diminish his racist attitudes and prejudices. These new friendships functioned to further E.'s process of alienation from Blood & Honour and spur dissonance with the feelings of anti-immigrant hatred which are inculcated and cultivated in the group.

Extremist violence and the sense of responsibility

Both young men have experienced violence against group members within the extremist group. They seemed to be shocked by the power and the arbitrariness of the group leaders, which served to damage their sense of group identity. It seems to have been a crucial moment for their opening process on the emotional and cognitive level (Dechesne 2011; Horgan 2007), as they had started to realize that they were somehow wrong about the group and that it was not what they had expected. They both avoided talking about their own contributions to violent actions and responsibilities. Of course, the interview situation and the fear of prosecution can influence or hinder an admission of guilt. However, they did not seem to be reflecting on the difference between material damage and human harm, which corresponds to the findings of research with sentenced extremists conducted by Villiger (2017). A quite egocentric view prevailed in both interviews, probably fostered by the stressful situation of defection and the sense of uncertainty they were living in and grappling with.

The gap between idealised coherence of extremism and the reality of contradictions

E.'s aim was to obtain a sense of belonging and protection through the affiliation with the right-wing extremist group, but the very opposite happened after a while. R.'s original aims of humanitarian aid were in contradiction to what he experienced once he had arrived in Syria. The gap between the reasons that motivated him to join IS and the daily reality of war in Syria led him to change his mind. This process corresponds to the attitude changes of most IS defectors observed in the recent studies by Neumann (2015) and Speckhard and Yayla (2015). Similarly, E. describes Blood & Honour as a dysfunctional system, with soldiers who perform violent acts and ideologists who instrumentalise the young group members. Both young men saw themselves as victims of ideologists behind the scenes and wished to depart from the organization, leaving a world of extremism and cruelty behind.

Fear of blame and prosecution

The individual motivations for which a person had originally decided to join an extremist group likewise play an important role: it is possible, that the original motivation persists despite doubts and criticism of certain rules or of the behaviour of the extremist group. These rules are no longer seen as relevant due to the dissonances, which cancel out former aims and beliefs. Such contrasts between expectations and concrete experiences provoke strong cognitive and emotive dissonances and consequently a high degree of stress (Eser Davolio/Gabriel 2014), which can then lead to disengagement. The option of defecting from the extremist group is strongly connected with and influenced by other factors, such as fear of possible acts of revenge by the in-group or fear of anticipated legal prosecution; a legal prosecution that is perceived as respectful can support the disengagement process (Rieker 2014). The support for those who opt out has to be adapted individually and "reinforced by a relation-building process to strengthen personal stability" (Norricks 2009: 312).

Comparing and contrasting the two interviews, we can state that R. as a returnee is in a quite different position than E., who goes on with his life on the same territory as his former extremist

group with its net of social control and strong readiness to violence. R. has left IS and its sphere of influence behind and can feel quite secure in the Swiss context, where the network of radicals has not extended to the point where it can exert pressure or revenge on individuals.[10] This also influences the readiness to cooperate with the police, which was an option for R.[11] but not for E., who did not trust the police and feared possible repercussions should Blood & Honour discover the treason.

The pathway from dissonance to disengagement?

A key question arises: how can knowledge about how dissonances develop and about repositioning and disengagement processes be of use in preventing radicalisation as well as in the socio-pedagogical treatment and support of those who choose to opt out? The two case studies show that it is important to understand the individual process in order to better grasp the triggers and their motivation The same is true for possible dissonances, which can arise when such motivations or convictions are not fulfilled.

This exploratory case study regarding radicalisation processes, emerging dissonances and the opening processes of a former right-wing extremist and a returnee does not permit us to generalise the findings. It can give insights and further suggestions, but we have to keep in mind the limitations of the setting of comparison: the two interviews were conducted in two different studies in diverse contexts with two individuals, each with their respective background. Moreover, the interview situation was characterised by the fear of prosecution, which influenced the way they told their stories. Despite these limitations, a detailed look into the way they described their emerging dissonances and the effects of the disillusions they experienced can generate relevant insights into such processes.

At first, the conflicting cognitions created surprise (R.'s arrival in Syria); in a second phase, a state of disillusion emerges (seeing others combating and killing for fun); at the third stage, frustration sets in (imprisonment); and finally, the individual is forced to reposition. In the context of this logic, the individual is forced to overcome the initial impotence and confusion about the own role and the role of others, and in a psychologically demanding process has to find the own point of view (Taft 1977). The state of stress is heightened by every added cognition that contrasts or contradicts the current convictions.

A further analysis of the disengagement process of R. shows that the dissonances cross the same levels and topics as the radicalisation process as described by Eckert (2009). First, the distinction of collectives (friends vs. enemies) leads to doubts regarding the scheme of the faithful

---

[10] R. does not mention any fear of revenge or pressure; he even declared in documentaries that he had cooperated with the police, indicating for example the exact location of a centre of suicide bombers in Syria.
Ruchti François, «Un djihadiste suisse témoigne de ses mois d'enfer en Syrie», 19:30, RTS, 04.04.2014.
https://www.rts.ch/info/suisse/5748488-un-djihadiste-suisse-temoigne-de-ses-mois-d-enfer-en-syrie.html;
Ruchti François and Widmer Marie-Laure, «Sur la piste des djihadistes suisses», Temps Présent, RTS, 09.10.2014.
http://www.rts.ch/emissions/temps-present/6095937-sur-la-piste-des-djihadistes-suisses.html.
[11] A lenient sentence allowed R. to realise the importance of the dissonances that he experienced during his engagement with IS. Understanding these dissonances has multiple functions on different levels. First, it enabled him to interpret his engagement with IS and to formulate regret that his parents have suffered and that it is painful to have a criminal record.

and non-faithful; the second step is then the perception of injustice in IS arbitrariness as well as of events of extreme violence, progressing to the point where he feels like a victim of IS totalitarianism. Thus, we can speak about a reversion of the process by means of intensifying dissonances. This model, originally developed for right-wing extremism (Willems/Würtz/Eckert 1993), can obviously also be applied to the evolution of E: on the first level of radicalisation, there is a strict dichotomy of collectives (friends vs. enemies). This attitude then creates difficulties, doubts and dissonances, when he recognises while working with friendly foreigners that he can no longer view them as enemies; and second, the camaraderie in Blood & Honour is revealed to be a violent and bloody pecking order, entailing the risk of becoming a victim oneself. So the same mechanisms that made him a member of the right-wing extremist group - protection from a circle of like-minded and combating his 'enemies', as well as the sense of belonging and a strong group cohesion - in the end serve to repel him.

The insights into the individual radicalisation process and the personal needs that are supposed to be compensated or fulfilled by joining an extremist group contribute to a better, in-depth understanding that can be useful for the prevention of extremism and disengagement support. Assisting former extremists in disengagement from extremist groups is a quite delicate process; it involves guiding on how to safely quit the group, while also supporting the creation of a life outside extremism. Moreover, in connection with the practical side of disengagement of individuals, we have to consider the confusion created by dissonances and assist the elaboration of a meaningful world. We can thus conclude that it is important to know the pathway *into* radicalisation in order to analyse and understand it as a basis for examining and supporting the exit *from* it.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the two interviews, we highlighted a number of parallels in the pathway into extremism taken by these two young men, and especially in their exit route from such extremism. In both cases, this process had its roots in the discrepancy between promises, expectations and the reality encountered in an extremist group, followed by disillusion and criticism. In both cases the search for ways and means to overcome and compensate the sense of impotence and the need for recognition led to joining an extremist group, and the subsequent slide into a violent subculture due to new social contacts (peers, recruitment) and opportunities was followed by an abrupt awakening when they realised the gap between the imagined coherence and the reality of contradictions. Especially the experience of violent acts against members of the same group functioned as triggers for growing doubts. This gap provoked dissonances, because they knew that violence in the group was unpredictable and could turn against everyone. Since the observation of such disparities had been previously ignored and hidden by the individuals in question, they were clearly perceived only after direct evidence.

Furthermore, the interview situation and the perceived desirability they enjoy as interviewees in this context promotes a self-representation as victims and the denial of their involvement and responsibility as actors and witnesses of extremist violence; indeed the element of their own feeling of being wanted as interviewees represents a strong limitation of these two case studies.

We can conclusively state that the analysis of radicalisation processes and the emerging doubts and dissonances of individuals is important for dealing with those who opt out, to understand and retrace the evolution of their radicalisation and their successive disengagement and defection.

Acknowledgements

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

References

Cesari, Joyceline (2004). *When Islam and democracy meet.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Christensen, Tina Wilchen (2015). *A question of participation – disengagement from the extremist right: A case study from Sweden.* Roskilde: Roskilde Universitet.

Crettiez, Xavier (2008). *Les formes de la violence.* Paris: La Découverte.

Dalgaard-Nielsen, Anja (2013). Promoting Exit from Violent Extremism: Themes and Approaches. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, 99-115.

Dechesne, Mark (2011). Deradicalization: not soft, but strategic. *Crime Law Social Change* 55(4), 287-292.

Eckert, Roland (2009). Stufen der Radikalisierung und Exit-Optionen. POLICY– *Politische Akademie* 34, 5-6.

Ebner, Julia (2018). *Wut. Was Islamisten und Rechtsextreme mit uns machen.* Darmstadt: Theiss Verlag.

Eser Davolio, Miryam and Daniele Lenzo (2017). *Radikalisierung & Extremismus.* Sichergsund. St. Gallen: Kanton St. Gallen.

Eser Davolio, Miryam, Dilyara Müller-Suleymanova and Dominik Müller (2017). Spannungsfelder im Umgang mit dem Phänomen dschihadistischer Radikalisierung im Schweizer Kontext – ein neues Handlungsfeld für die Soziale Arbeit? *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziale Arbeit* 21/22, 13-30.

Eser Davolio, Miryam (2017). Hintergründe jihadistischer Radikalisierung in der Schweiz – eine Fallstudie. In: Hoffmann, Jens and Nils Böckler (eds.). *Radikalisierung und extremistische Gewalt: Perspektiven aus dem Fall- und Bedrohungsmanagement*, Frankfurt/M.: Verlag für Polizei und Wissenschaft, 155-165.

Eser Davolio, Miryam, Elisa Banfi, Milena Gehrig, Brigitta Gerber, Burim Luzha, Eva Mey, Ilona Möwe, Dominik Müller, Dilyara Suleymanova, Isabelle Steiner, Carole Villiger and Laurent Wicht (2015). *Backgrounds of jihadist radicalisation in Switzerland. An exploratory study with recommendations for prevention and intervention.* Last accessed 17.10.2017 on https://www.zhaw.ch/de/soziale-arbeit/forschung/delinquenz-und-kriminalpraevention/jugendkriminalitaet-und-jugendgewalt/hintergruende-jihadistischer-radikalisierung-in-der-schweiz/.

Eser Davolio, Miryam and Thomas Gabriel (2014). Junge Rechtsextremisten in der Schweiz. Professionelle Begleitung von Ausstiegsprozessen. In: Rieker, Peter (ed.). *Hilfe zum Ausstieg? Ansätze und Erfahrungen professioneller Angebote zum Ausstieg aus rechtsextremen Szenen*. Weinheim and Munich: Juventa, 95-113.

Eser Davolio, Miryam and Matthias Drilling (2009). Rechtsextremismus im Fürstentum Liechtenstein. Eine qualitative Studie zu Hintergründen und Herangehensweisen. Eine Studie im Auftrag der Gewaltschutzkommission des Fürstentums Liechtenstein. Basel: FHNW. Last accessed 17.10.2017 on: https://www.fhnw.ch/ppt/content/pub/rechtsextremismus-im-fuerstentum-liechtenstein.

Festinger, Leon (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

Frank, Anja and Michaela Glaser (2018). Biografische Perspektiven auf radikalen Islam im Jugendalter. In: Glaser, Michaela, Anja Frank and Maruta Herding (eds.). *Gewaltorientierter Islamismus im Jugendalter*. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa, 62-79.

Gabriel, Thomas (2009). Parenting and Right-wing Extremism – Analysis of the biographical genesis of racism among young people. Results of a Swiss NRP 40+ study. In: Niggli, Marcel A. (ed.). *Right-wing extremism in Switzerland. National and international perspectives*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 193-205.

Glaser, Michaela (2015). Extremistisch, militant, radikalisiert? *DJI Impulse, Das Bulletin des Deutschen Jugendinstituts* 1, 4-7.

Gooren, Henry (2007). Reassessing conventional approaches to conversion: Toward a new synthesis. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46(3), 337-353.

Guadagno, Rosanna E., Adam Lankford, Nicole L. Muscanell, Bradley M. Okdieand and Debra M. McCallum (2010). Social influence in the online recruitment of terrorists and terrorist sympathizers: Implications for social psychology research. *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale* 23(1), 25-56.

Heinke, Daniel H. and Mareike Persson (2015). Zur Bedeutung jugendspezifischer Faktoren bei der Radikalisierung islamistischer Gewalttäter. *Zeitschrift für Jugendkriminalrecht und Jugendhilfe* 1, 48-53.

Heitmeyer, Wilhelm and John Hagan (2004). *International handbook of violence research*. Volume 1. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Horgan, John (2009). *Walking away from terrorism: Accounts of disengagement from radical and extremist movements*. New York: Routledge.

Kundnani, Arun (2012). Radicalisation: The journey of a concept. *Race & Class* 45(2), 3-25.

Lister, Charles (2015). *Returning foreign fighters: Criminalization or reintegration?* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.

McCauley, Clark and Sophia Moskalenko (2011). *Friction: How radicalisation happens to them and us*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Neumann, Peter (2015). *Victims, perpetrators, assets: The narratives of Islamic State defectors*, London: ICSR International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence.

Norricks, Darcy (2009). Disengagement and deradicalisation. Process and programs. In: Davis, Paul and Kim Cragin (eds.). *Social Science for Counterterrorism*. Santa Monica: RAND, 299-321.

Ongering, Lidewijde (2007). *Home-Grown Terrorism and Radicalisation in the Netherlands: Experiences, explanations and approaches, testimony before the U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee*. Last accessed 17.10.2017 on: www.investigativeproject.org/documents/testimony/292.pdf.

Rieker, Peter (2014). Ausstiegshilfe konkret. In: Rieker, Peter (ed.). *Hilfe zum Ausstieg? Ansätze und Erfahrungen professioneller Angebote zum Ausstieg aus rechtsextremen Szenen*. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa, 146-171.

Rosenthal, Gabriele (2005). *Interpretative Sozialforschung. Eine Einführung*. Weinheim: Juventa.

Roy, Olivier (2015). „Komm auch zum IS… … das ist wie im Computerspiel Call of Duty – nur in echt". *Das Magazin* 12, 20-27. Last accessed 17.10.2017 on: http://blog.dasmagazin.ch/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ma1512.pdf.

Schiffauer, Werner (2000). *Die Gottesmänner. Türkische Islamisten in Deutschland*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.

Sedgwick, Mark (2010). The concept of radicalisation as a source of confusion. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22(4), 479-494.

Speckhard, Anne and Ahmet S. Yayla (2015). Eyewitness accounts from recent defectors from Islamic State: Why they joined, what they saw, why they quit. *Perspectives on Terror* 9(6). Last accessed 17.10.2017 on: http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/475/html.

Steinberg, Guido (2015). *Kalifat des Schreckens. IS und die Bedrohung durch den islamischen Terror*. Munich: Knaur.

Taft, Ronald (1977). Coping with unfamiliar cultures. In: Warren, Neil (ed.). *Studies in Cross-cultural Psychology*. London: Academic Press, 121-153.

Villiger, Carole (2017). *Usages de la violence en politique (1950-2000)*. Lausanne: Editions Antipodes.

Waldmann, Peter (2011). Die Eskalationsschraube von Isolierung und Radikalisierung. In: Waldmann, Peter (ed.). *Terrorismus: Provokation der Macht*. Hamburg: Murmann, 230-252.

Wiktorowicz, Quintan (2004). Joining the cause: al-Muhajiroun and radical Islam. Conference paper, '*The Roots of Islamic Radicalism*'. Yale University, May 2004. Last accessed 17.10.2017 on: http://insct.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Wiktorowicz.Joining-the-Cause.pdf.

Willems, Helmut, Stephanie Würtz and Roland Eckert (1993). *Fremdenfeindliche Gewalt. Eine Analyse von Täterstrukturen und Eskalationsprozessen*. Forschungsbericht für das Bundesministerium für Frauen und Jugend, Juni 1993. Trier.

Wohlrab-Sahr, Monika (1999). *Konversion zum Islam in Deutschland und den USA*. Frankfurt/M.: Campus.

Zick, Andreas and Nils Böckler (2015). Radikalisierung als Inszenierung. Vorschlag für eine Sicht auf den Prozess der extremistischen Radikalisierung und die Prävention. *forum kriminalprävention* 3, 3-16.