

Young and radical: Political Violence during Adolescence

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Deutsches
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Young and radical

Political Violence during Adolescence



Research into children, young people and families at the interface between science, politics and professional practice

The German Youth Institute (DJI) is one of the biggest social science research institutes in Europe. For more than 50 years it has conducted research into the life situations of children, young people and families, advising national government, the German federal states and local authorities and providing key stimuli for professional practice.

Founded in 1963, the governing body of the institute is a non-profit association with members from the fields of politics, science and federations as well as child, youth and family welfare institutions.

The institute is mainly funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) and to a lesser extent by the federal states of Germany. Additional project funding is provided by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) as well as by foundations, the European Commission and science funding institutions.

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Research Department J4

Research Department J4 “Political socialization and the promotion of democracy” looks at the processes of political socialization during adolescence and at the potential of youth policy and education to promote successful political socialization so as to confront and prevent the development of hostile, anti-democratic and violent tendencies.

The department is currently running a number of projects dedicated to strengthening democratic attitudes and preventing young people from developing politically radicalized and hostile attitudes and forms of behaviour. Some of these projects, due for completion at the end of 2019, collect and systematize existing knowledge from research and practice – relating both to radicalization processes and their pedagogical prevention – and offer forums for professional debate. Other projects support and evaluate national

programmes involved with developing and testing new methods and approaches in professional practice for promoting democracy and preventing political radicalization. Thus, the department significantly adds to our understanding of contemporary societies and recent developments in the field of youth, its changing conditions and growing challenges concerning socialization in general and the threat of radicalization in particular.

The aim is to expand this perspective in future through projects that look into the various dimensions of political socialization during adolescence – adopting a research perspective that specifically focuses on the opportunities and challenges during adolescence as well as the point of view of the young people themselves. Another aim is to examine the impact of key aspects such as gender and migration on political socialization processes.

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Work and Research Department for Right-Wing Extremism and the Prevention of Radicalisation

Tackling anti-democratic tendencies and violence motivated by political orientation or prejudice is a task facing the whole of society and making ever-changing demands on youth policy, youth education and youth (social) work. Educational approaches to right-wing extremism and racism continue to be extremely important. This is not only underlined by the renewed rise in (violent) racist crime since 2014 and the growth of right-wing populist movements, but by the widespread existence of right-wing extremist, racist and Islamophobic attitudes in the general population.

For some years now, violent manifestations of Islamism—a further anti-democratic phenomenon leading to the stigmatisation of social groups—has also been the focus of public attention. This presents special new challenges for educational practitioners: society is pressing for urgent action, but there is little reliable knowledge about this phenomenon in Germany to date, and work on developing educational approaches in this field only started a few years ago.

There is a further need for action and development on the part of educational practitioners in the light of the current polarisation of attitudes towards migration and religion in society as a whole that is reflected inter alia in socio-spatial conflicts. Practitioners need to find ways of combating polarisation and alienation tendencies.

The task of the Work and Research Department for Right-Wing Extremism and the Prevention of Radicalisation, which is part of the specialist division “Political Socialisation and Promotion of Democracy” of the German Youth Institute DJI (Deutsches Jugendinstitut) in Halle (Saale) is to

generate and compile (national and international) information about these educational fields of action on behalf of scientists, specialist practitioners and politicians. Special focus is being placed on practice-orientated knowledge about aspects of these phenomena specific to (stages of) adolescence along with the recording and systematisation of practical experience gained through dealing with them from an educational perspective.

This task is being handled via the following means:

- Systematic analysis of existing findings;
- Qualitative surveys on practical issues;
- Promotion of interdisciplinary discourse among the various professionals involved;
- Practice-orientated compilation of knowledge and communication of findings to specialist practitioners;
- Consulting services for specialist practitioners, politicians and other relevant professionals.

These tasks have been assigned to two subject areas: “right-wing extremism and racism” since the turn of the millennium and “violent manifestations of Islamism” since 2011.

Current areas of focus are as follows:

- Violent manifestations of Islamism—challenges for the youth welfare service;
- Political and ideological extremism on the Internet;
- European comparison of disassociation and deradicalisation work;
- Current socio-spatial conflict constellations and possible solutions in the context of migration and religion (in the planning phase).

Evaluation

In Germany, there are a wide range of initiatives, associations and individuals fighting against racial discrimination, anti-Semitism and other forms of "group-related hostility"; they are committed to promoting democracy and combating radicalisation. The purpose of the federal government programme "Live Democracy!" (Demokratie leben!) launched by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth" (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend) is to assist in developing concepts, projects and structures that promote multicultural, non-violent and democratic coexistence.

In recent years, scientific monitoring and evaluation of such measures and programmes aimed at promoting democracy and preventing radicalisation have become increasingly important. Since 2001, researchers from the specialist division "Political Socialisation and Promotion of Democracy" of the German Youth Institute DJI (Deutsches Jugendinstitut) in Halle (Saale) have been monitoring and analysing federal government programmes intended to combat right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism; since 2015, these have included the federal government programme "Live Democracy!" The main purpose of the programme evaluation is to analyse and assess the federal government programme "Live Democracy!" as a whole. This involves merging the data and findings gathered from the scientific monitoring of the various programme areas. It also entails an analysis of the data specifically compiled for the purpose of conducting an overall evaluation of the federal

programme "Live Democracy!" Special focus is being placed on the structural and thematic changes in the programme "Live Democracy!". The results of these studies are made available to politicians, programme stakeholders and the professional public in suitable form.

The aim is to identify, professionally categorise and assess the achievements of the individual initiatives undertaken in the various areas of the programme (scientific monitoring) as well as those of the programme as a whole (programme evaluation). In addition, based on scientific monitoring and programme evaluation, recommendations are to be formulated with respect to further content-related and structural development. This form of programme monitoring is intended to take adequate account of the magnitude and complexity of the programme, i. e. the heterogeneity of its structures, subject areas and service offer formats. Special attention is being paid not only to new structural elements, but also to new content-based priorities such as anti-democratic and anti-constitutional forms of Islam. The evaluation approach calls for the active involvement of all parties connected with the programme as well as further stakeholders, and includes both formative and summative elements in order to facilitate a multi-angled view of processes, trends and results. The specialist division "Political Socialisation and Promotion of Democracy" of the German Youth Institute in Halle (Saale) is thus making an important contribution to the scientific monitoring and evaluation of the federal government programme "Live Democracy!"

Extremist, militant, radicalised?

Many young people are fascinated by violent political groups. The reasons are just as diverse as the movements they join. A critical view of current terms and (explanatory) concepts.

The vast majority of young people belonging to political and ideological groups, youth scenes and milieus are non-violent and democratically oriented. However, some adolescents and young adults turn to political and ideological streams whose propensity for or actual use of violence gives the security authorities cause for alarm and triggers unease within society at large in a variety of ways.

Since the 1990s, violent manifestations of right-wing extremism have repeatedly given cause for concern. In the light of the rise of the “Islamic State” and the current wave of people leaving for Syria and Iraq, international Islamist terrorism is also now perceived as a major political (and security) problem. However, in the context of certain protest events, such as May Day demonstrations, Nazi rallies or anti-globalisation campaigns, there are also regular outbreaks of violence within militant left-wing circles which similarly attract public attention.

Left wing as well as right wing violent groups mostly consist of young people

Despite their different ideological content and goals, these events have one thing in common: they appear to be disproportionately attractive to young people (mainly men, but women too) compared to their proportion in the population. Left-wing “Autonomists” and far-right “Autonomous Nationalists” even show a clear dominance of young people among their members

(Pfahl-Traughber 2010; BMI 2010). (Both groups are currently seen as being the most violent within their respective political environment.) However, violence-oriented Islamism also appears to hold a special attraction for adolescents and young adults: according to the security authorities, there are a striking number of young people among those leaving for Syria, the youngest being only 13 and 14 years of age.

Not only in political discourse, but also in academic debate there is some controversy about how these phenomena should be classified and to what extent they are comparable. Opinions already differ largely when it comes to terminology. Security authorities and certain strands of political research refer to these phenomena as “right-wing extremist, left-wing extremist and Islamist violence” and as “political or ideological extremism”. These terms are connected with a specific classification of the corresponding political streams: firstly, they are deemed to be fundamentally opposed to the German constitution, the political system and the basic rights anchored therein; and secondly, they are regarded as being actively intent on abolishing the existing political system and its key institutions.

The classification of the far-left scene as “extremist” is controversial

However, the classification of current manifestations of violence in the left-wing activist scene or indeed of the scenes themselves as

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“extremist” is highly controversial – not only in political circles, but in the academic community as well. One of the questions being scrutinised is whether the goals propounded by these scenes are fundamentally undemocratic and anti-constitutional. A further counter-argument is that in both right-wing extremism and islamist extremism acts of violence deemed ideologically legitimate include the calculated killing of human beings, extending as far as terrorism and genocide. Current violence “from the far left”, however, is seen to be targeted primarily at objects or arises during confrontations with political opponents and hence has a very different quality (Scherr 2010; Schultens/Glaser 2013). Consequently, researchers in the field of social movements and youth studies as well as educationalists working with these youth scenes favour the use of alternative terms, such as “left-wing militancy”.

There is also disagreement on the issue of how different forms of Islamism should be classified in terms of their potential for violence. In general language usage and to some degree in academic publications (Jaschke 2007), “Islamism” and notably the sub-stream “Salafism” are frequently equated with terrorist movements advocating violence. Although the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution

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(Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, BfV) draws a distinction between “political” (legalistic) and “jihadist” (in the sense of terrorist) streams, it classifies both as “extremist” on the grounds that their goals are anti-constitutional (BfV 2013, p. 192).

This classification on the part of the security authorities is viewed as problematic particular among social scientists and researchers in the field of Islamic studies. Critics of this classification argue that some Islamist groups, though pursuing political goals, are reformist-oriented and hence in full conformity with the constitution. Moreover, it is claimed that certain streams of Islamism pursue solely religious goals and do not strive to bring about political change. Consequently, many academics and practitioners call for greater differentiation and a more precise use of terminology. They view this as important – especially in the light of wide-spread anti-Muslim tendencies – in order to prevent further stigmatisation of non-violent, democratically-oriented Muslims.

Politics and research show considerable interest in the pathways of terrorists

For some years, there has been a marked trend among academics, and increasingly among educationalists, towards using the term “radicalisation” when discussing these phenomena. At first glance, this term appears to circumvent the classification difficulties and corresponding controversy outlined above. Unlike the term “extremism”, “radicalisation” is not primarily a categorisation term used for classifying attitudes and behaviour. Instead, the term relates to processes sharing common dynamic patterns, which in principle can have different end points.

In recent years, the term has found its way into specialist discourse in Germany, owing primarily



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to the fact that the debate about the prevention of right-wing extremism has been broadened to include (violence-oriented) Islamism. Hence, a term commonly used since 2004 in international political and academic debate about current terrorist (especially Islamist terrorist) phenomena and their security implications has now been assimilated into the German speaking world.

However, in international discourse, the term also represents a paradigmatic shift which prompted the terrorism researcher John Horgan (2008) to coin the phrase “from the roots to the routes”: While academic debate on terrorist phenomena previously concentrated on the social and political causes (“roots”), research has since been focusing to an increasing extent on the actual development paths (“routes”) of individuals and groups who turn to terrorism.

In particular, this focus has generated research concentrating on individual development and paths leading to violent groups as well as the dynamics within such groups. This perspective emphasises that the development of

violence-oriented political positions is a gradual process and that people do not become terrorists “overnight”. According to one criticism, however, it tends to take inadequate account of the overall social context and its significance for radicalisation (Sedgwick, Kundnani 2010).

As far as disengagement and deradicalisation work is concerned, this perspective of analysis is helpful in that this work can take biographical experience and problematic constellations within the personal or social environment as a promising starting point for pedagogical approaches. An in-depth understanding of these micro-level and meso-level social factors can therefore provide important information, allowing targeted programmes to be developed.

Turning to violent Islamism also depends on factors relating to society as a whole

It is nevertheless apparent from the example of “Islamist radicalisation” that these perspectives are inadequate for a thorough understanding of radicalisation processes. A number of studies indicate that factors relating to society as a whole play a decisive role in the drift towards violence-oriented Islamist streams. These factors include stigmatising debates and discriminatory structures in immigration societies, as well as international conflicts (and the way in which they are depicted in the media), on the basis of which corresponding experiences are explained and instrumentalised by ideological groups.

The high significance of social conflict dynamics and constellations for individual and collective development is also evident from research conducted into left-wing militant scenes and incidents of violence. In connection with these phenomena in particular, perspectives which take into account the interaction between opposing



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social groups appear to be generally more promising than the focus on “risk factors” in individual biographies for explaining why people turn to these scenes.

It is therefore important to consider these factors in the debate about prevention and education and to include corresponding complementary perspectives (for example, from the field of protest and social movement research) in explanatory approaches. From the perspective of educational practitioners, this is necessary also for the sake of appearing credible in the eyes of the adolescent target groups and thus succeeding in reaching them.

Problematic link between the concept of radicalisation and the counter-terrorism debate

From the point of view of youth policy and youth education, the main problem of the “radicalisation” concept – as well as the concept of “political extremism” – is that it is currently closely linked with academic and political discourse about the analysis of and fight against terrorism. The terrorism researcher Peter Neumann summarises the common understanding of “radicalisation” as follows: “Radicalisation is what goes on before the bomb goes off”.

This link carries a risk of people being labeled as potential terrorists, which is not very helpful when working with young people in this field – and in the worst-case scenario can prove counterproductive (Kiefer 2013). In the case of young Muslims, for example, it may foster precisely those perceptions of discrimination which research has shown to play a role in the appeal of violence-oriented Islamist groups. Furthermore, it could promote deterministic and alarmist views already all-too prevalent in public debate about political violence during adolescence.

When working with young people, these perspectives need to be countered with the help of findings and explanatory models derived from youth research. On the one hand, such findings demonstrate that factors such as (provocative) differentiation from the parents' generation, a heightened search for purpose and identity, or a search for adventure and borderline experiences – all typical of the growing-up phase – also play a role in the described phenomena. Hence, they can help to provide a better understanding of the processes and a more objective classification of their potential danger to society.

On the other hand, such perspectives highlight a further peculiarity of the adolescent phase – its openness: in this phase of life, the sense of group belonging is far less stable than in later years, and values and political beliefs have not yet been definitively formed.

This fact supports the view (and the hope) that the dangers emanating from violence-oriented, extremist political streams to which young people are exposed can be counteracted by means of education and assistance programmes.

However, pedagogical practice requires striking a difficult balance: on the one hand, practitioners have to heed any warning signs that violence-oriented attitudes and behaviour patterns may be emerging or becoming entrenched; on the other hand, they need to be sensitive to the risks and potential negative consequences of stigmatising young people by making over-hasty classifications and judgements.

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2. How adolescents become Islamists

The causes of radicalisation vary from case to case. The quest for identity, so often experienced during adolescence, and the desire to rebel against parents frequently play a major role. However, the process is always the result of several factors interacting with each other and by no means follows a linear path.

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks researchers from various disciplines have increasingly been asking the question how and why young people from “the West” become involved in or endorse acts of violence rooted in Islamism. The topicality of this issue was demonstrated in January 2015 by the attack on the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo as well as the foiled terrorist attack in Germany and attacks on Jewish institutions, on soldiers and on public transport. European fighters are participating in conflicts (for example in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan or Chechnya), and in many countries there is a highly-charged debate underway about immigration or the high-profile activities of Islamist groups (such as the so-called “Sharia police”, a group of young Islamists operating in the German city of Wuppertal). Against this backdrop, politicians, educationalists and youth support workers are seeking ways of counteracting these phenomena.

The amount of academic literature exploring the underlying causes and conditions which lead to radicalisation in this context has increased significantly in recent years. However, the empirical data on which it is based remains meagre. This is partly due to the fact that it is very difficult to seek out young people at an early stage of radicalisation and carry out sociological research into their motives and backgrounds.

Young people’s quest for purpose in life can represent an important starting point on the road to radical Islamism

Researchers have nevertheless been able to find two main solutions to the problem of acquiring research material: One such solution involves examining the “career paths” of the perpetrators of violent (terrorist) acts retrospectively. This means evaluating court files, newspaper articles or interviews with experts, i. e. information compiled by third parties for non-academic purposes. Another solution is to interview young Muslims from Islamist circles. This method is based on the assumption that radicalisation factors are to be found where radicalisation is likely to begin. In the case of this approach, it is often insufficiently clear to what extent the interviewee has genuine links with violence-oriented Islamism.



Foto: Oleg Zabelin – Fotolia

A further difficulty arises from the fact that terms like Islamism, Jihadism, Salafism, Islamic extremism or fundamentalism are defined and used in very diverse ways in different studies. It is therefore often unclear to what extent studies actually point to one and the same phenomenon. Instead, the findings highlight single aspects of a complex, multi-faceted spectrum of phenomena. To some extent, the research perspectives respond to the way in which public attention is steered by the media, the security authorities and political circles, for whom this topic is ever-present.

Moreover – depending on the definition used – the “phenomenon” itself is hard to underpin with data. However, the figures collated by the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, BfV) provide an approximate reference point. These show, for example, that in 2014 there were around 7,000 Salafists living in Germany (BfV et al. 2015, p. 92ff.). At the beginning of 2015, the authorities assumed were aware of about 600 predominantly young people having travelled to Syria and Iraq to support an Islamist party to the conflict (ibid.). Despite this problematic framework, research provides some key explanations.

Many of those radicalised were not very religious beforehand

Radicalised adolescents often speak of their duty to join true Islam, to build the caliphate in the so-called “Islamic State” and to defend the Islamic community, the Ummah. However, more deep-rooted motives and very different reasons can also be identified.

Many studies emphasise the role that the desire to break away and seek new orientation – often experienced during adolescence – plays in Islamist radicalisation. Dutch and Danish studies

show that young people’s quest for identity and purpose in life can represent an important starting point on the road to radical Islamism (Buijs/Demant/Hamdy 2006; de Koning 2009; Hemmingsen 2010).

Crises and experiences of failure may constitute a further factor (Wiktorowicz 2005). A case study of a member of the so-called “Sauerland-gruppe” (a German terrorist cell detected in 2007) comes to the conclusion that several such experiences brought an influence to bear on the individual concerned – the divorce and marital strife of the parents, an attempted suicide on the part of the mother, dropping out of school, the girlfriend’s unwanted pregnancy and the feeling of being let down by best friends. In this case, the planned attack is interpreted as compensation for a “failed” life story (Schäuble 2011).

The perceived humiliation of the Muslim collective can promote radical positions

A common trait of many violent Islamists is that most of them are initially “newcomers to religion”. In many cases, they have converted to Islam from another religion or they are “reawakened believers” who have a Muslim family background and have reverted to religion. They are not well versed in theology, which makes them potentially receptive to radical interpretations propounded by preachers, as they are not capable of weighing up differing versions of Islam against each other or of putting forward theological counter-arguments (Wiktorowicz 2005; Precht 2007; Verfassungsschutz Berlin 2014).

Researchers suspect that discrimination and marginalisation also constitute important factors prompting people to turn towards (violence-oriented) Islamism (Heitmeyer/Müller/Schröder 1997; Wiktorowicz 2005; Slooman/Tillie 2006).

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Discrimination may not only be experienced in the form of personal exclusion; it is above all the perceived humiliation of the Muslim collective which promotes radical positions (Brettfeld/Wetzels 2007; Al-Lami 2009; Sirseloudi 2010). From a methodological point of view, however, it is difficult to prove a causal link between experiences of discrimination and radicalisation.

Many researchers share the view that Islamist radicalisation can only be explained in the context of debates about integration, discourse about national security, and anti-Muslim sentiments (see, for example, Abbas 2011; Kühle/Lindekilde 2010; de Koning 2013). One reason for this is that social debate can be the cause of discrimination being experienced or perceived; another reason is that radical leaders pick up on this kind of rhetoric to reinforce or in some cases even fabricate such perceptions. Furthermore, it is possible that polarising phenomena within society, such as right-wing populism and Islamism, have a mutually reinforcing effect.

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The play on young people's thirst for "kicks" and protest

Entry into a radical group or a radical milieu is often brought about via peer contact (see, for example, Wiktorowicz 2005; Schäuble 2011). In addition, access may be facilitated by partners in chatrooms, by mosque communities, religious leaders, parents, sports coaches or fellow prisoners (Lützing 2010; HKE 2014). Following initial contact, the increasing intensity of group interaction and the simultaneous distancing from previous relationships leads to a change in values: "in-group love" (a feeling of belonging within the group) heightens "out-group hate" (the hatred of others not belonging to the group; Sageman 2008, p. 86–87).

In regards to the attraction of violence-oriented Islamism for adolescents, there is a noticeable play on young people's thirst for excitement and "kicks", for protest and provocation, which is also reflected in the conscious choice to adopt a distinctive outward appearance (Hemmingsen 2010; Dantschke et al. 2011) or a preference for "Salafi war songs" (Verfassungsschutz Berlin 2011). Salafism can offer an anti-identity both to mainstream society and to the parental generation, which may, for instance, be leading a traditional Islamic lifestyle or hardly have any affinity to religion at all (de Koning 2009).

Moreover, Salafism promises its followers moral and intellectual superiority (Meijer 2009). In the case of a member of the "Hofstad Network", a former terrorist group in the Netherlands, the notion of human extinction and the perception of the individual's own role in the war of good against evil were major factors (Buijs/Demant/Hamdy 2006). The self-image of Islamists as being a "select vanguard", living out true Islam and destined for paradise, appears to hold a special attraction for adolescents (Hemmingsen 2010; Sinclair 2010; de Koning 2013).

Deradicalisation is never out of the question

Turning to violence-oriented Islamism can never be traced back to one single factor. It is always the result of several interacting factors, and even if many of these factors are present, radicalisation is not an inevitable consequence. Moreover, relevant literature shows that radicalisation is not a linear process, but one which can intensify, tail off again and terminate at various stages, which means deradicalisation is never out of the question. There are opportunities for prevention and intervention at various points in the radicalisation process.

The approaches adopted so far primarily focus on the run-up phase to radicalisation: they aim, for example, to provide young people with participatory opportunities or to encourage them to engage in religious education processes as a means of counteracting radical messages. Furthermore, education programmes can present young people at risk of radicalisation with alternatives and offer them and their families support.

In Germany, there are now initiatives in place which facilitate exit from radical groups and provide assistance in reintegrating into society. But while a pedagogic approach has been adopted to deal with right-wing extremism, support-oriented methods and programmes of this kind aimed at combating (violence-oriented) Islamism are still in their infancy in Germany. However, this could change in the coming years, as current federal government programmes and regional state initiatives aimed at promoting democracy and preventing radicalisation are focused, among other things, on working with young people who have already been radicalised or are at risk of being radicalised by (violent oriented) Islamism.

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Preventing entry, assisting exit

Differentiated practices have become established in the work with right-wing extremist oriented adolescents in Germany. An analysis of current approaches, their potential for success and professional limitations.

Radicalisation or affiliation with radical groups is neither an inevitable process, nor an irreversible one. There is always the possibility – particularly in the case of young people – that “radicalisation careers” will be aborted or radical attitudes and groupings renounced. Pedagogical programmes in the field of disengagement and deradicalisation work profit from this circumstance and aim to initiate, encourage and support such processes.

In Germany, reliable experience with these approaches has so far been derived solely from work with right-wing extremist oriented adolescents; by contrast, work with adolescents who have already become or are at risk of becoming (violence-oriented) Islamists is still in its infancy. In the far-left political spectrum, there are

currently no phenomena which lend themselves to disengagement and deradicalisation work.

The following analysis starts by tracing this field of work from its beginnings to the present day; it later goes on to outline the basic principles of the work and – based on a current study by the German Youth Institute (DJI) – to describe successful approaches as well as limitations of this work and to illustrate current challenges.

The majority of the early exit initiatives were run by the security authorities

Pedagogical work with right-wing extremist oriented adolescents began in the 1980s. The study of violent, right-wing extremist oriented



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youth groups at that time prompted the development of an approach centred around “acceptance-based youth work” (“Akzeptierender Ansatz”) with far-right cliques (Krafeld 1996). The aim of this work is to prevent these groups or their members from drifting (deeper) into right-wing extremist organisations by providing socio-pedagogical assistance or alternative recreational activities.

In the 1990s, initiatives based on this approach proliferated in the field of open outreach youth work (for example, in youth clubs, youth centres or within the street-work context), particularly in the East German states – partly owing to the fact that they were funded by a federal government action plan. However, in the early years of the new millennium, there was a change of tack on funding policy for the prevention of right-wing extremism: from then on, funding measures focused on supporting and strengthening democratic counterforces, with the result that in the ensuing years youth work with right-wing extremist oriented adolescents was attributed less importance (Glaser/Greuel 2012).

In parallel with the development described above, the emergence of so-called exit initiatives led to a further area of disengagement and deradicalisation work becoming established. These schemes, which are mainly based on the



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principle of one-to-one support, provide people seeking to quit the scene with assistance in severing previous affiliations therewith and reintegrating into new social circles – often over the course of several years (Glaser/Hohnstein/Greuel 2014). Here again, the main users of these schemes are young people, who display differing degrees of ideologisation and a variety of motives for affiliation with the scene. While the majority of the early exit initiatives were run by the security authorities, youth welfare organisations have also started undertaking this work in recent years. Today, exit initiatives are operated in virtually every German state in addition to the nationwide government schemes.

Following the NSU murders, attention to adolescents at risk of entering far-right extremist scenes has increased

Ever since the right-wing terrorist organisation by the name of the “National Socialist Underground” (NSU) was exposed in 2011, politicians and practitioners have been devoting increased attention to work with adolescents at risk of entering far-right extremist scenes. Enhanced efforts are now being undertaken once more to develop and implement pedagogical schemes specifically tailored to this target group. However, clique-oriented outreach work has since come to play a lesser role, as it is now far more difficult to reach right-wing extremist oriented adolescents in the public domain. This is partly due to the changed leisure behaviour of adolescents, who are increasingly shifting their social activities to the private or semi-public (also virtual) domain. In order to counteract this process, schemes developed in recent years have focused on a targeted one-to-one approach. Professionals from within the adolescents’ social environment (such as teachers or school social workers) often play a bridging role in these schemes, facilitating access to the young people concerned.

These diverse formats are aimed at different target groups, call for differing work practices (in terms of target group access or protection needs, for example), and are implemented in wide-ranging contexts (including youth clubs, the street-work setting or prisons). However, they all have certain basic principles and core elements in common: they are geared to the needs of the target groups; they involve examining all areas of life and relevant social circles; and they aim to achieve not merely formal disengagement from the scene, but a departure from right-wing extremist thinking.

Individual stabilisation and social integration

Support-based practices targeting actual needs were a key element of the “acceptance-based youth work” approach previously developed by the educationalist Franz Josef Krafeld. The paradigm formulated here was that practitioners should respect adolescents, take their needs seriously, and help them overcome difficulties – but without condoning their conduct (Krafeld 1996). (Socio-)pedagogical programmes tailored to the needs of individual adolescents still play a key role in current working practice – both with people at risk of entering the scene and those seeking to exit it. These programmes include assistance with integrating in school life, in vocational training and in the labour market, as well as in new social circles, such as clubs or other sets of friends and acquaintances. Further measures are aimed at dealing with violence and addiction problems or distressing past experiences. In particular when working with adolescents at risk of entering the scene, it is important to offer attractive alternative recreational activities.

In terms of providing successful assistance in disengagement processes, (socio-)pedagogical support appears to be important for a variety



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of reasons: They make a key contribution to the development of a trusting working relationship and a willingness to cooperate on the part of the adolescents concerned. Furthermore, this kind of support takes into account the acute physical, psychological and social problems faced by their clients. These problems may be so serious that they first need to be mitigated if there is to be any chance of tackling the issue of right-wing extremism with the adolescents concerned. Moreover, research shows that in many cases affiliation with right-wing extremist groups is a strategy adopted to compensate for distressing past experiences and unfulfilled social needs. A pedagogic approach to dealing with such motives can therefore help to diminish the attraction of these scenes and their “compensatory programmes” – and hence aid and stabilise the disengagement process (Glaser 2013).

Assisting ideological discourse

In order to cater for the differing needs of adolescents, the schemes are dependent upon a broad cooperation network. Cooperation is sought, for example, with youth and social welfare organisations, various therapy providers and public authorities as well as clubs and associations. In addition, practitioners deem it important to scrutinise persons in the adolescents’ immediate social environment and possibly get them involved too. Parents, siblings or former friends may be able to provide support in the

disengagement process. However, it is equally possible that they are just “part of the problem”. Building and maintaining these cooperative relationships can be work-intensive, which may pose a challenge, especially in the case of schemes which run for a limited period of time and have minimal staff resources.

Girls and young women are under-represented in many schemes

In addition to stabilising the individual and reintegrating him or her into society, advanced conceptual models of the “acceptance-based approach” (Bleiß 2004; Osborg 2006) also attach major importance to addressing the ideological orientation and behaviour patterns of adolescents. The vast majority of the schemes currently in operation aim not only to assist young people in disengaging from the scene in terms of social relationships, but also in overcoming right-wing extremist and far-right oriented attitudes. The spectrum of the approaches implemented includes making spontaneous responses to discussion issues (for example, racist comments made by adolescents), offering opportunities to talk to practitioners, and providing access to pedagogical schemes (such as visits to memorial sites or intercultural encounters) tailored specifically to the target group.

However, activities which go beyond unstructured offers of dialogue are an exception in

current project practice. Moreover, not all schemes have sufficient staff and time resources for ideology-based activities of this kind. Such work can easily fade into the background, especially when the young person concerned is experiencing a combination of several problems and stress factors all at once. Unlike in the case of aid and support activities, only a few organisations approach this task by forming alliances with specialist partners from the fields of civic and intercultural education. It is therefore clear that – with a few exceptions – ideology-based work with adolescents could be more professionally grounded, both in terms of the available resources and professional concepts.

Professional challenges and limitations

There is also a need for further professional development and additional concepts with respect to accessing certain target groups. At present, schemes reach out primarily to “deviant” adolescents who commit criminal offences or participate in other blatantly right-wing conduct. This applies, for instance, to the exit initiatives, whose target groups are mainly referred to them via the criminal justice system. However, it also applies to work with people at risk of entering the scene, as here again it is predominantly the highly visible manifestations of right-wing extremism which attract attention (targeting of male-dominated youth cliques and multipliers who display “deviant behaviour”).

As a result, girls and young women, who are less prone to committing criminal offences and generally behave in a less deviant manner, are very under-represented in many schemes compared with their estimated 10 to 20-per-cent share in the scene (Möller 2010). Therefore, in order to reach other target groups than previously the case, points of access outside the field of criminal justice, for example in the education

and youth support system, need to be further increased. In addition, this situation calls for greater awareness of the often less aggressive manifestations of right-wing extremist orientation among female target groups.

Pedagogic work is also facing new challenges owing to the fact that young people’s lives are increasingly taking place in virtual environments and that the World Wide Web provides an abundance of readily accessible right-wing extremist content and contact opportunities. However, the Internet also offers opportunities and starting points for pedagogical intervention, as right-wing extremist orientation can manifest itself there in other ways. By way of example, girls and women are very active in social networks and are often more open about their ideological leanings on these platforms than in the public domain. This suggests that it would be worthwhile exploring web-based access points and approaches more closely in the future and (further) developing and testing appropriate formats.

The Internet offers opportunities and starting points for pedagogical intervention

Assuming adequate staff and time resources are available, work with far-right oriented and right-wing extremist adolescents can prove successful in many cases – especially with respect to social and behavioural disengagement from right-wing extremist scenes. Moreover, case reports repeatedly indicate that when adolescents are given ongoing support, it is possible to initiate or reinforce ideological deradicalisation processes. However, in the estimation of practitioners, initiating and encouraging such changes is far more difficult than persuading adolescents to relinquish their right-wing extremist affiliations and activities. These changes are usually also of a more limited and fragile nature.

On the one hand, these findings indicate that, in terms of resources, ideological discourse should be more firmly anchored in the schemes and supported by professionals (via cooperation with education schemes, for instance). Findings from attitude and prejudice research, on the other hand, show that as a general rule values and interpretative patterns can only be changed with great difficulty and to a limited extent. It is therefore important to hold realistic expectations of pedagogic work to avoid placing too much pressure on the schemes.

Clues on how to prevent Islamism

In future, a closer look needs to be taken at the potential benefits of pedagogic work in dealing with radicalised Islamist adolescents or young people vulnerable to radicalisation. Although right-wing extremist and violence-oriented Islamist ideologies differ in terms of their goals and the contexts in which they evolve, certain

parallels can be observed in individual (de)radicalisation careers, such as the importance of crisis and disintegration experiences or the significance of social contexts.

Based on these parallels, it appears plausible to transfer or adapt certain elements of the work carried out with far-right oriented and right-wing extremist adolescents. Moreover, as the study of violence-oriented Islamism in Germany is still in its infancy, practical experience derived from disengagement and deradicalisation endeavours in the right-wing extremist scene could constitute a valuable learning resource for this work. However, as there is currently only limited knowledge about the causes of Islamist radicalisation in Germany, it is also important to avoid premature and over-simplified parallels and to remain sensitive to the specific demands of this new field of activity.

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