
Parental Influence on Radicalization and De-radicalization according to the Lived Experiences of Former Extremists and their Families¹

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Abstract

EU member-states target families in order to prevent or counter radicalization. However, there is little empirical knowledge to confirm that parents influence the radicalization and de-radicalization process. Because there is little known about the role that parents play in radicalization and de-radicalization, this qualitative study explored the family dynamics in these processes together with 11 former radicals and their families. The study consists of 21 in-depth interviews with Dutch former radicals and their family members and it was found that formers and their families do not recognize a direct influence of parents on radicalization and de-radicalization. However, a more indirect influence seems to be in place: a (problematic) family situation may influence the radicalization process and family support can possibly play a role in de-radicalization. It is also stressed that parents have need for knowledge about the different ideologies and for tools on how to respond to their children's radicalization. Family support programs could focus on these lacunas in order to help families counter radicalization.

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Introduction

Following the Arab Spring which caused destabilization in many countries of the Maghreb and the Levant, and the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011, we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of young Muslims who leave their countries to fight in

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foreign battles. Also, polarization has increased in other political spectrums, leading, for example, to right-wing extremism. This has ignited the debate about radicalization amongst young people and in particular the question of whether parents could have prevented them from becoming radicalized. For example, from the summer of 2012 up until now, European authorities have seen thousands of young Muslims leave their cities and countries behind and move to the Syrian (and later Iraqi) battlegrounds (Neumann, 2015). Some EU member states have responded by targeting families to prevent or counter radicalization (Gielen, 2014, 2015). By improving parents' knowledge about radicalization, parents could possibly recognize and act upon this process better. By improving contact between parent and child, the parent may be able to influence the de-radicalization process, and de-radicalized youth would have a stable home base to return to (Bjørger & Horgan, 2009; Gielen, 2014; Weggemans & De Graaf, 2015).

In the Netherlands, the government has started to involve parents in their approach to radicalization by developing an action plan to counter jihadism. Support groups, for example, were founded for parents whose child radicalized, and professional upbringing support is to be implemented to help parents raise resilient citizens and prevent them from radicalizing (Ministry of Security and Justice, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism & Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2014). However, these measures have not yet been supported by empirical research on the actual influence parents may have on the radicalization- and de-radicalization process. This qualitative empirical study about former extremists and their family members was conducted in the Netherlands and is part of a larger European research study (Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2015). The study will explore *how former radicals and their family members perceive the potential parental influence on radicalization and de-radicalization*.

To answer this question, we will consider the stories of eleven Dutch former radicals and eleven family members about their radicalization- and de-radicalization. The formers and their families were asked how they *perceived* the role of parents in the radicalization and de-radicalization process. No agreement exists on the definition of radicalization (Veldhuis &

Staun, 2009). Some scholars even argue that radicalization does not exist, but is a term constructed by media, government, and security agencies (Neumann, 2013). However, most scholars distinguish between violent and cognitive radicalization (Bartlett, Birdwell & King, 2010; Vidino & Brandon, 2012). McCauley & Moskalenko (2008, p. 415), for example, define radicalization as a “dimension of increasing extremity of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in support of intergroup conflict and violence” while Vidino and Brandon (2012, p. 9), for example, define cognitive radicalization to be “the process through which an individual adopts ideas that are severely at odds with those of the mainstream, refutes the legitimacy of the existing social order, and seeks to replace it with a new structure based on a completely different belief system.” Moreover, radicalization would be relative (Mandel, 2009). Mandel states that being radical is always in comparison with something else, for example the law or tradition. Whether an action or an individual is called “radical” depends on these comparisons.

In order to do justice to the relative meaning of radicalization, we constructed the following definition, based on the existing definitions but foremost based on the conversations we had with young people who have extreme ideals and their family members: *radicalization* is considered to occur when a child or adolescent starts to develop political or religious ideas and agency that are so fundamentally at odds with the upbringing environment’s or mainstream’s expectations that the relationship with the upbringers is at stake. Again, this definition is neither exhaustive nor universal, but we found that parents, practitioners, and social workers felt that it is very useful, as it adds a pedagogical element to the existing definitions of radicalization.

Furthermore, we define a *former* to be a person who once had extremist ideas or performed extremist behavior: this person ought to be de-radicalized *or* disengaged. Participating respondents have distanced themselves from their extremist thinking or behavior by leaving a particular group *or* swearing off violence that one once used or condoned. *De-radicalization*, according to Neumann (2010), signifies substantive changes in ideology. *Disengagement* facilitates behavioral change such as rejection of violence (Horgan &

Braddock, 2010). Ergo disengagement does not require a change in the radical ideas as such, yet it does require a change in readiness to use violence in striving for change.

We interviewed both formers and their families because we believe that they could reflect on their radicalization- and disengagement or de-radicalization process. In this article, we will keep in mind that parents may both influence and are being influenced by the radicalization of their children. We will therefore demonstrate how these parents interacted with their children during the radicalization and de-radicalization process, and examine how this may or may not have influenced the process. Our research focused on people with various types of former extreme ideals, as growing evidence reveals that processes of radicalization among widely divergent groups show parallel developments (Gielen, 2008; Sikkens, Van San, De Winter & Sieckelinck, in press; Stern, 2003; Van San, Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2010). Previous research has shown that clear parallels exist in the radicalization processes toward various extreme ideologies: it has been found that young people with different extreme ideals have often identified the same push- and pull factors that led to their radicalization. These young people seem to have been entangled in a similar search for belonging, identity, and answers to complicated existential questions, encountering different ideologies during their quests (Sikkens et al., in press).

This paper will first describe how the research was conducted. Next, we will discuss some previous research on family, radicalization, and de-radicalization. Given the relative infancy of the concepts of disengagement and de-radicalization within the field of radicalization studies, the current article also seeks to explore what can be learned about family influence from the more established literature on desistance from crime.

How formers and their families feel about the potential parental influence on radicalization and de-radicalization is presented in the results section. The discussion deals with answering the question of what parental influence on radicalization and de-radicalization looks like according to formers and their family and how this knowledge can benefit further research and current policy on preventing and countering radicalization.

Methods

Recruitment and sampling

In this study, a case-study approach was used to gain a detailed understanding of the potential family influence on de-radicalization and disengagement in a Western upbringing context. The study consisted of interviews with eleven formers and eleven family members from the Netherlands. The formers used to act upon extreme-right, radical Islamic, or extreme left-wing ideals. Furthermore, we made sure that our study contained both male and female respondents, to create a more representative study.

Before we started our field research, we expected it to be easy to contact formers, because they were no longer involved in an extreme ideology, and could therefore share their stories with us. But the opposite appeared to be true: some formers struggle with feelings of shame and guilt, and/or do not feel like raking up the past. Furthermore, it was especially difficult for us to find and contact former Muslim radicals. This is possibly caused by the fact that they became less extreme in avowing their beliefs, but do not recognize themselves to be a *former*, as they are still Muslim and may believe in similar ideals. Another possible explanation would be the current political climate, in which (radical) Muslims are under severe scrutiny due to the perceived terrorism threat. Formers may therefore not be willing to participate in research on this topic.

Most of our respondents were contacted through gate keepers in the radicalization field. We also approached respondents we had spoken to during our pilot study in 2009 as some of them had disengaged or de-radicalized since their interview. Parents were approached through their children because the formers were easier to find than their parents. Siblings were interviewed in case the former did not permit us to speak to his or her parents. The interviews were conducted in Dutch and for the purpose of this article translated to English.

It should be noted that due to the nature of the data sought for the study, an application of statistically representative sampling methods was not possible. The Netherlands is a small country and does not have unlimited numbers of potential interviewees with 'extremist'

backgrounds and experiences. Informants who fit the profile for interviewees and were willing to participate in the study, ideally with some of their family members, turned out to be quite a scarce population.

Interview specifics

Owing to the efforts of multiple key figures, we were able to contact eleven formers (eight males and three females), eight parents and three siblings. Five of the formers we interviewed used to have extreme-right ideals, three used to be active animal activists, and three respondents were former Islamic extremists, of which two were involved in violent jihad.

The age that the formers got involved in these extreme ideologies ranged from 12 years old to 16 years old, with a mean age of 14 years old. The age that they desisted was between 15 and 27 years old, with a mean of 21 years old.

Besides eleven formers, we interviewed eight parents and three siblings for triangulation. Most family members confirmed the stories told by the formers. However, in a few cases tension exists between the different storylines. These differences and the possible implications of these differences are considered in the results section.

Process

During this research, in-depth interviews were held with 22 respondents using prepared topic lists. The majority of the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting. We spoke to most of our respondents in the privacy of their own home, which gave insight into the settings our respondents grew up in. Three respondents were interviewed in a public place upon their request. Four interviews were conducted through Skype. A webcam was then used instead of a face-to-face setting.

All our respondents gave written and/or verbal consent to participate in our research and the interviews were audio recorded with permission of the respondents plus subsequently transcribed verbatim. In order to guarantee confidentiality, all information that could lead to a

participant's identity was deleted. The research had ethical approval from the Faculty Ethics Review Committee of the Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

Analytical framework

This study was explorative, as there is little theoretical knowledge based on empirical data about the family and upbringing dynamics within the radicalization and de-radicalization process. Due to this lack of knowledge and existing theories, we chose to use a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), aiming to generate theory from the qualitative data we gathered. We do take into account existing research on parenting styles that acknowledges a combination of warmth and control as generating the best outcomes for children (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). We will therefore explore the family climate during the maturation of the young people, as it may have influenced the radicalization process. To obtain information about the potential influence of parents on the radicalization and de-radicalization processes, we asked the young respondents and their parents how they came into contact with the radical group, whether the parents knew about their ideals, and the kind of ideals with which they were reared. We also asked about the home situation as they grew up and about the nature of the parent/child relationship during the “radicalized period”. Furthermore, the young respondents and their parents were asked why de-radicalization had begun, about parental support during the de-radicalization process, and about the parent/child relationship at that time (see also the Appendix).

Theoretical Background

This article explores *how former radicals and their family members perceive the potential parental influence on radicalization and de-radicalization*. To answer this question, we will consider scholarly work that has recognized a direct parental influence, work suggesting that there is an indirect parental influence, and literature arguing that parents may not have any influence at all. Subsequently, the existing literature on parental influence and

de-radicalization will be explored. As there are a limited number of studies on this topic, the current article also seeks to explore what can be learned about parental influence from the more established literature on desistance from crime.

Direct parental influence on radicalization

A growing body of literature exists on the influence of parents and parenting on radicalization (Bakker, 2006; Duriez & Soenens, 2009; Epstein, 2007; Hopf, 1993; Post, 1984; Sageman, 2004), and previous research shows that there is no unambiguous answer to the question of how parents influence radicalization. A large body of research indicates that parental warmth combined with control would produce the most positive child outcomes (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). An affective parental interaction with the child would help their (moral) development (Smetana, 1999). Moreover, it is through discipline encounters that parents help their children to establish prosocial moral internalization (Hoffman, 2000). Furthermore, literature shows that a lack of support, supervision, harsh disciplining, inconsistent parenting, delinquent family members, and problems within the family would enhance the chances of young people developing deviant behavior (Hoeve et al., 2008). Would the same account for radicalization?

Scholars have demonstrated that parents may influence the radicalization process of their children directly or indirectly. Parents influence their children directly by means of their genetic makeup, “beliefs, and behaviors as well as indirectly by means of their influences on one another and the multiple contexts in which they live” (Bornstein, 2002, p. 24). In general, a more fundamental intergenerational transmission of ideology would exist, which includes the intergenerational transmission of racism and prejudice (Duriez & Soenens, 2009). Pels and De Ruyter (2012) also found that there exists a significant concordance in racism between parents and their children; especially in the extreme-right scene parents would have a direct influence on their children as they act as role models. Radicals often share the extreme views of their parents (Duriez & Soenens, 2009; Gielen, 2008; Van Donselaar, 2005). Gielen (2008) has shown that extreme right-wing people often share the xenophobic and nationalist views of

their parents. A similar conclusion emerges from research by Van Donselaar (2005), who found that young people often pick up anti-immigrant feelings from their parents. In the Islamic context, Asal, Fair and Shellman (2008) state that family would play an important role within recruitment for jihad. A recurrent finding in the existing literature is that young people often join gangs, cults, and extremist groups because they have family members or friends who are already members of these groups (Hafez & Mullins, 2015). Bakker (2006), McCauley and Moskalenko (2010), and Sageman (2004) showed that social affiliation may play a role in the recruitment of jihadist groups, as a person is more likely to radicalize if a close friend or family member has already joined a terrorist group. Bakker's (2006) total sample of 242 jihadists included 50 persons who were related through kinship. However, these family relationships mostly consisted of siblings, cousins, and kinship through marriage – and only in a few cases parent/child relationships.

Post, Sprinzak and Denny (2003) found that amongst 35 incarcerated Middle-Eastern terrorists, most had no family member who was a member of the same terrorist organization. Still, the parents of these incarcerated respondents in general supported their children's cause or did not dissuade their sons from active involvement. The sample also included parents that socialized their children in favor of the extremist groups from an early age (Post et al., 2003).

Indirect parental influence on radicalization

Alongside the above mentioned direct influence of socialization, a more indirect socialization influence is mentioned in the existing literature (Bigo, Bonelli, Guittet, & Ragazzi, 2014). According to Bornstein (2002), indirect parental influence is more subtle than direct parenting. Conflict between parents, for example, could influence the quality of interaction with their children (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). If conflicts at home become severe, it could lead to a decreased availability towards the child: parents could miss out on signals their children send because they are caught up in different matters (Bornstein, 2002). According to Bigo et al. (2014), unstable family situations may fortify the radicalization process. The Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation, established by the European Commission in 2006,

mentions broken families, substance abuse within the family, family violence, and loss of family members as part of these problematic family backgrounds (Coolsaet, 2011). Of course, the loss of a family member does not directly lead to radicalization, but it may prompt an individual to become receptive to radical groups (Borum, 2011). According to Bjørgo and Carlsson (2005) and Lützing (2012), many young people are lured into radical groups in their search for substitute families and father figures: many young members of extremist groups have less-than-ideal relationships with their families and with their fathers in particular. Provocations like joining a racist group can be a child's way of getting attention from their family, and older members of the group often fill the void of the missing father-figure (Bjørgo & Carlsson, 2005).

Moreover, in prior research it was concluded that parents often did not seem to be aware of their children's increased susceptibility to radicalism (Van San et al., 2010, 2013; El-Said, 2015). There was also a general lack of response among parents towards their children's ideas (Sikkens, Sieckelink, Van San & De Winter, 2017; Van San et al., 2013). The dominant reaction was an indifferent one, in which the parents considered the ideals to be the child's own choice. This seems remarkable as the moral development of ideals requires monitoring and debate (Van San et al., 2013). But many parents do not know how to handle strong ideals and potential radicalization: a so-called "parental uncertainty" seems to exist (Van San et al., 2010).

No parental influence on radicalization

There are also scholars that claim that parents do not influence the radicalization process at all: in the works of Maleckova (2005) and Silke (2008), both very influential in the field of terrorism studies, no clear link was found between a family background marked by poverty or deprivation and membership in extremist organizations. A review by Christmann (2012) also found little on family influence, except to confirm that Muslim extremists and terrorists – violent or otherwise – came from a wide range of family backgrounds. More scholars claim that parents usually do not serve as an example (Botha, 2014; Buurman & De

Graaff, 2009; Linden, 2009; Stern, 2010). All over Europe, testimonials have emerged from parents who do not support their children's decision to fight in Syria (Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2015). Buurman and De Graaff (2009) demonstrate that young Muslims often would try to increase their knowledge about "pure Islam," freed from non-Islamic traditions they learned from their parents. Additionally, Linden (2009) shows that many adolescents and young adults with radical opinions mentioned that their parents taught them that discrimination is unacceptable and that all people should be treated with equal respect. Botha's (2014) research shows that most young people who joined the extreme al-Shabaab group were not directly influenced by their parents: these particular parents would have hardly played a role in "transferring their political orientations through socialization to their children" (Botha, 2014, p. 899).

Parental influence on de-radicalization

Regarding the move away from radical groups or ideas, most people who join extremist groups eventually leave them (Bjørgero & Horgan, 2009). However, according to Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013), in 2013 there were less than 20 empirically-based publications on disengagement in a Western democratic context – a precariously thin evidence base for understanding this phenomenon (see also Barelle, 2015). According to this prior research, family may play a role in de-radicalization: there are scholars who suggest that family can move people away from radical groups (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014; Bjørgero & Horgan, 2009; El-Said, 2015; Reinares, 2011). Altier et al. (2014) show that positive ties with family members who do not have extreme ideals, may cause radicals to rethink their beliefs. Jacobson (2008, p. 3) demonstrates similar findings: terrorists "who maintained contact with family and friends outside the organization were more likely to withdraw." Bjørgero (2009) pleads the same as he showed that it can be difficult for extreme-right members to exit the scene because they no longer have contact with their family and therefore have no one outside the extreme-right scene to fall back on. Support from their family would help them to disengage or de-radicalize (Bjørgero & Horgan, 2009). A research project conducted by Dutch

colleagues among former Jihadis of the so-called Hofstad group (Weggemans & De Graaf, 2015) also concluded that the individuals who had “gone straight” again, were often back on track thanks to their families. In recent years, family counseling programs have therefore been developed to counter violent extremism (CVE). The aim of these family counseling programs is to “affect the radicalization process of their family member through strategic strengthening of positive, pro-social relationships” (Koehler, 2016, p. 156). Specialized counselors help the family of a radicalized person to provide alternatives to involvement in radical groups and to alter the person’s affective commitment to the radical environment, aiming at the discontinuation of their involvement in the extremist groups (Koehler, 2016). Moreover, parents and other family members could mediate between the official exit programs and the potential exiters (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013). Mobilizing parents in order to reach out and influence radical youngsters would be a particularly effective approach “in societies where families and elders enjoy a great measure of authority” (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009, p. 251).

Contrarily, the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD, 2002) reports that parents hardly play a role in countering radicalization because their children find their parents too passive in how they respond to Western standards that are in conflict with Islam. However, up until now, the empirical evidence on family influence and de-radicalization remains scarce.

De-radicalization and desistance

As research on disengagement and de-radicalization is relatively new, the current article seeks to explore what can be learned from the more established literature on desistance from crime. Desistance from crime is sometimes defined as the moment that someone stops his or her criminal activities (Nuytiens, Christiaens, & Eliaerts, 2008). However, most scholars prefer to define desistance as an ongoing process (Kazemian, 2007). Therefore, Laub and Sampson (2003) distinguish between *termination* and *desistance*: *termination* is the moment in time that an offender quits crime. *Desistance*, on the other hand, is the causal

process that precedes termination and still continues after the termination. Desistance, then, is the process of quitting, which termination is part of (Laub & Sampson, 2003).

Research on desistance from crime shows that people (eventually) quit crime under the influence of different life events like marriage, military service, or serving time in prison (Farrall, 2004; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Nuytiens et al., 2008). Nuytiens et al. (2008) describe these life events as possible catalyzers leading to desistance. However, an offender first has to recognize such a life event as a possibility for change and, autonomously, seize this opportunity to desist. Human agency would be leading in the process of desistance (Laub & Sampson, 2003).

According to Sampson and Laub (1993), strong family ties are related to desistance. Both material and emotional support by partners, family, and friends can indirectly influence the motivation to quit crime (Farrall, 2002; Graham & Bowling, 1995). Also, Disley et al. (2011) pointed out that positive social ties to family members or friends outside of gangs, religious cults, or extreme right-wing groups are associated with exiting from these groups.

As can be seen, the previous research has shown that there is no unambiguous answer to the question of if and how parents influence radicalization and de-radicalization. Also, to our knowledge, former extremists and their parents have not been previously consulted about how they experienced parental influence during the processes of radicalization and de-radicalization. Therefore, this study explores their experiences and findings.

Results

Family climate

The families that our respondents grew up in were very different from each other. In some families, the situation seemed to be warm and stable. Other families went through turbulent times prior to the radicalization of the child. Divorce, health problems, mental health problems, and financial problems afflicted these families. In seven out of eleven families, the parents were divorced; three of the respondents grew up without knowing their father. The

large number of absent fathers due to divorce or work is striking: in seven cases the formers describe that they could not see their father as much as they would have liked. In five families one or more family members struggled with mental health issues like personality disorder, autism, anorexia, and depression. The problematic family climate may have played a part in the radicalization process of the child: parents struggled with all sorts problems, therefore they might have lost sight of their child and his/her ideals. In the case study of **Daniel**, a former Muslim extremist, his brother for example stresses:

My mother has had psychological problems all her life, and my sister required a lot of attention and care. She had to run the household all by herself, and so she was hardly able to get a handle on the situation.

This indirect influence of (a lack of) parenting was found in several of our case studies. We will further address the possible role of the parent on radicalization in the next paragraph. Still, it is important to address that not every respondent grew up in a troubled family: not all families in the study were characterized by multiple problems and malfunctioning. For some, radicalization was rather set in motion by contacts or influences from the surrounding environment like school or peers.

Role of the parent in radicalization

According to our respondents, family and parents in particular had little direct influence on their radicalization process. Most of the formers we interviewed did not learn their ideals from their parents. On the other hand, some had ideals that were in line with the ideals of their parents, though usually more extreme. The parent of an extreme right-winger would then, for example, vote for a political party on the right political spectrum. Like the father of **Tijmen**:

My dad basically agrees with the somewhat political right views, but he's more of a Fortuyn [former Dutch right-wing politician] voter.

Only one respondent answered that she was directly influenced by her mother. **Katie**'s mother was involved in animal activism, and brought her daughter up with the same ideals:

I can be short and clear about that: I got my ideals from my mother. It can't be any other way, you learn your ideals from your parents. First you have them [ideals] as a child, but over the years I discovered that they are ideals that I 100% agree with. And I just got involved, especially when my mother joined a group of animal activists. In the beginning, I was too young and stayed at home, but I knew that my mum was carrying out actions, and later on I joined her.

Except for Katie and her mother, the remaining respondents did not mention a direct influence by their parents on the development of their extreme ideals. Alternatively, an indirect influence of parents on the radicalization process seems to exist.

Other respondents address that they could not talk to their parents about their ideals. Because their parents were unable or unwilling to talk about politics and/or religion, these young people tried to find answers themselves. Like **Laura**, a former animal activist, who was interested in social and political issues at a very young age:

Kids in my class were interested in other things while I was worrying about the war or about Chernobyl. Back then I was 7 years old, and I asked my parents what was going on over there, and I had nightmares about it. When I was reading about the Holocaust, I would ask my parents questions about it, and adults would always answer "you're too young for that!" And if you keep hearing that, you start interpreting things the wrong way. If you keep hearing that you're too young for that and you should play with your dolls... but I didn't care about my dolls! So I had all this information, all by myself, and I started interpreting it in my own way. Now I can make sense of it, but back then...

Our interviews also showed that parents often had no knowledge about the religious or political views of their child, so it was hard for them to discuss these ideals, or to set boundaries. The mother of former right-wing extremist **Sylvia**, for example, reminisces that she was clueless about the signals that showed that her daughter was involved with the extreme right-wing ideology:

And then she got more of those right-wing... more of those t-shirts with...well name it... swastikas and such. I thought that was really... And then I was called by the school, because the school thought it wasn't normal. I said "well, what am I supposed to do? How should I interpret her rolled up jeans and army boots?" See, if I don't know! Because I wasn't occupied with that at the time. She was.

Sometimes the parents severely rejected their children's ideals, causing a break-up between the parent and child. Due to this break-up, parents no longer were able to monitor the ideal development of the child, and no longer had influence on the radicalization process. **Rowan**, for example, fled the house when he and his father kept fighting about his far-right ideas. Rowan wanted to hang a flag with swastikas:

Yeah of course my dad would become furious, and he would pull that flag right off the wall. And that was something you shouldn't do, because then you'd come between me and my ideals. So a couple of times we fought each other over this.

Interviewer: *So what happened to this flag in the end? Did you hang it or not?*

Rowan: *In the end, I gathered up all my stuff and left for like-minded people. And that's how I left home when I was 15. I went my own way, apart from everything and everyone.*

It was also difficult for the parents to monitor the radicalization process of their child or to intervene in this process once the child was radicalized. **Daniel**, a former Islamic extremist, illustrates this as follows:

What can parents do? You don't share anything with them [parents], you don't talk to them, you don't tell them what you're doing, so you keep them out very consciously. Your life is outside, in the mosque, with people on the Internet, so she [mother] has no insight into those matters and so she doesn't know. She only realizes it when you get caught for what you've done.

Most formers and their families did not receive any professional help when the radicalization occurred. It also seems that parents usually did not ask for help to confront the radicalization:

possibly because they feared it would worsen the situation, or because they were ashamed of the situation. Laura's parents said:

When you notice it [radicalization], you don't show anyone. It was hard as it was, trying to manage it, so you don't spill the beans. And you get isolated as a family. We tried to take the necessary steps like going to a child psychiatrist, but after a while you just don't know where else to look for help.

One mother argued that the authorities were aware of the situation, but did not intervene:

Mother: *She was under probation. They came over every once in a while and blabbered for a bit and that was that.*

Interviewer: *And did you speak to them about your right-wing ideas?*

Mother and Sylvia: *Yes.*

Sylvia: *It is written in all the reports but they didn't do anything about it.*

Mother: *They didn't do anything about it.*

More parents asked for help: For example, they turned to a local police officer or to Youth Care, but were turned away because their child had not (yet) violated any laws. Other professionals replied that they lacked expertise on the subject. Our respondents radicalized and de-radicalized before 2012. At that time, in the Netherlands, few professionals knew how to respond to radicalization.

Rowan stated that the involvement of authorities was not helpful because soon he was radicalized beyond the point that anyone could have influenced him. **Francis**, a former radical Muslim, confirms this as he claimed that no one could have de-radicalized him at that point in time:

What would have worked? Nothing I think. I wasn't open to different ideas or ideologies. My teacher asked me many times "you're an intelligent boy, you have straight A's in Philosophy... why do you believe in this?" That didn't influence me. Me and some other orthodox Muslims had discussions with Christians, but we just tried to convert each other. So that didn't influence me. More than that: such attacks only made me more convinced!

Role of the parent in de-radicalization

Our interviewees stress that they disengaged or de-radicalized because they were caught by the police and/or were incarcerated, that they were positively influenced by a peer or life partner, or that they disengaged or de-radicalized because they entered a new phase in life (for example by starting a family or a new education). Katie, for example, says:

The fact that I have children now is one of the reasons that I don't join those kinds of actions anymore.

Animal activist **Jean-Paul**, who got arrested after he broke into a mink farm and assaulted a man, no longer participates in these kinds of actions either. He explains that the legal consequences of former actions made him rethink his strategy:

But when you've done things, and you experienced the legal consequences of it, you'll think "what shall I do now?". And then you'll go from there. It hasn't been an intentional choice. Actually, I'm still doing exactly the same, but with a different sort of methodology.

Some of our respondents state that they disengaged or de-radicalized under influence of their partner or a friend. Tijmen's best friend, for example, confronted him with the intolerability of his far-right ideals. And Sylvia de-radicalized with the support of her new boyfriend:

I think it really helped us that he was able to support me and I was able to support him. Because getting out all by yourself, that's quite difficult.

Other factors that might have influenced the disengagement and de-radicalization of our respondents are sheer maturation and human agency, defined as *intentionally influencing one's functioning and life circumstances* (Bandura, 2005, p. 9). Francis stresses that he basically de-radicalized all by himself:

Because again, this [de-radicalization] was mainly a rational process, nourished by doubts that came from my moral dilemma. And eh... I didn't need help with that. I really think that this is something you have to do by yourself.

According to most of our respondents, parents would have had little influence on the de-radicalization or disengagement process. The brother of Tijmen, for example, claims that they did not have any influence at all:

Interviewer: *But did you or your parents influence his desistance?*

Brother: *No, I don't think so. No, absolutely not. It started apart from us and it disappeared apart from us as well.*

Few of our respondents believe that parents influence the disengagement or de-radicalization process, though Francis feels that his father played a role in his de-radicalization process in an indirect way. When his father confronted him with a different perspective on his religious views, this did not immediately change the way Francis avowed his extreme beliefs. But his father's words indirectly worked as a catalyst, and played a role once the de-radicalization process started:

Well, it wasn't really a reason, it was more like a possible catalyst: I got back in touch with my dad and the things he told me... he plainly confronted me with things I already had doubts about, but which I tried not to think about. I didn't really embrace what he told me, but I remembered it. And afterwards, when I gave way to my own doubts, it played an important role.

Furthermore, some respondents experienced support from their parents during the disengagement or de-radicalization process, of which they described as indispensable. Laura was incarcerated for years after she had planned and executed multiple attacks in order to safeguard animals. She started disengaging while imprisoned, and feels that her parents played a supportive role in her disengagement process after she got released:

I think after my release, I've known so many women who got out, and who stood at the gate with their carton box without knowing where to go, and without any guidance. My parents were there for me when I got out, and when I just got out I lived with them as well. If I hadn't had my parents, I wouldn't have known where to go with my carton box either.

Formers versus Family

During this research, we have interviewed both formers and their families in order to obtain triangulated data. In most cases, the formers and their family members had similar accounts on the radicalization and de-radicalization process. However, it was interesting to see that both groups sometimes mentioned the same facts but interpreted them differently. Daniel's mother, for example, did not interfere when Daniel radicalized. According to Daniel, his mother reconciled herself with the situation because her children should be free to choose their religion. However, according to Daniel's brother, their mother was too scared to interfere. He recalls:

Daniel was big and strong and quite intimidating. In the end, my mom didn't dare to interfere anymore.

Another example of different accounts between the former and the family is the interview with **Andre**, a former extreme-right sympathizer and his parents. The parents of Andre bought a guitar in an effort to keep Andre's mind off extreme right-wing politics. Though his parents believe that the guitar indeed influenced the de-radicalization process, Andre laughs and says:

Yes they tried, they offered me some distraction: they gave me a guitar so I could play. Really liked that. They hoped that I would decrease my political involvement but that didn't work. I still was politically involved. I loved the fact that they gave me a guitar, absolutely! [laughs] I really wanted a guitar, but it didn't have the effect that they wished for.

The differences in accounts between the formers and their family members perhaps suggest that a distance exists between family members and radical youngsters, as they no longer are on the same page. It also shows that it is not easy for a family member to reach out to the radical child during the process of radicalization and de-radicalization.

Discussion and Conclusion

Existing literature does not provide a univocal answer to the question of what role parents play in the radicalization and de-radicalization process of their children. Since so many young people have left for Syria, public opinion seems to be rather certain about the importance of the role that parents play within the radicalization process. However, it begs the question of whether this is justified. Furthermore, up until now the empirical evidence about the role that parents play in the process of disengagement and de-radicalization of their children is still scarce. This study, though small, has systematically researched this role in the Netherlands. The strength of this study is that it was based upon interviews with both formers and family members and therefore contributes to our knowledge of the role that family plays in radicalization. Yet, the study was based upon a limited number of case studies which has to be considered when reading the conclusions. Moreover, the respondents were asked about their perception of a potential parental influence: it should be taken into account that the respondents and their family members are not objective observers, but are active agents whose interpretation of their lived experiences may be biased.

Parental influence on radicalization

Previous research has been ambivalent about whether young people learn extreme ideals, prejudice, and racism through their parents or elsewhere. Although some formers developed an extreme version of their parents' ideals, most parents in this study did not share or teach their children any extreme ideals. Consistent with the work of Christmann (2012) and Silke (2008), this study reveals no direct link between family and the development of extreme ideals: both formers and their family members gave little weight to the influence of parents on their radicalization. This study confirms that most parents felt they could not influence their children's ideal development. Instead, parents were not aware of the child's activities, or they were effectively incapable of doing something, due to other troubles, or because the parents were simply not around.

Thus, according to our respondents, parents usually do not play a direct role in the radicalization process. However, whether parents indeed played no role in the radicalization remains uncertain. Perhaps parents played down their influence on the radicalization process in order not to appear culpable. Or, perhaps the respondents did not want to jeopardize their (renewed) positive relationship with their parents by suggesting any blame.

A latent role, on the other hand, seems to exist. Consistent with Bigo et al. (2014), Bjørge and Carlsson (2005), Hoeve et al. (2008) and Lützing (2012), this study shows that some family climates may indirectly offer a fertile ground for radicalization, as some formers came from turbulent family situations. The parents may have been struggling with different matters, which potentially led to not recognizing the radicalization process, and less monitoring. Primary factors that may have an indirect link with radicalization are experiences of painful loss, in combination with a difficulty to offer emotional support or clear boundaries. About two thirds of the families we have interviewed coped with divorce, an absent father, lack of emotional support, psychiatric issues, illness or death, similar to the families that can lead young people to develop other kinds of deviant behavior (Hoeve et al., 2008). Risk factors like these may feed an adolescent's unrest and anger, and some families may find it hard to cope with these intense feelings due to a lack of parental authority or support. Such circumstances do not in themselves explain the process of radicalization, but can form a fertile breeding ground for it (Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2015). However, fertile ground does not automatically lead to radicalization: there are many children from broken homes that do not become radical. To radicalize, the young person has to come into contact with the ideology first: a seed must be planted. The turbulent family factor probably comes into play when radical groups prey on the uncertain youth who has no alternative safety net.

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that even outstanding parental qualities are no guarantee against radicalization. Some functioning families in the sample, who offered their children a warm emotional climate in combination with clear rules, were confronted with the sudden radicalization of their offspring and struggled (Sikkens et al., 2017). These parents often did not interfere in the radicalization process because they did not recognize the signals,

or did not know how to handle them. A parental uncertainty existed within these parents and they did not know whom to turn to for support. It also shows that the general climate of upbringing is one among other important factors that may have contributed to radicalization. Moreover, it shows that, just like the families that experience multiple problems, these parents could use professional family support in confronting radicalization as they feel uncertain about how to handle the development of ideals.

Parental influence on de-radicalization

Previous research has not yet answered the question of whether parents can influence the de-radicalization process of their children. In this study, the interviewees placed very little weight on the influence of parents in their decision to turn away from the radical narrative: almost all informants describe their parent's role in the de-radicalization process as non-existent. Any importance of a family member in this process was hesitantly mentioned and most of the time in combination with more influential factors outside the family such as agency (self-initiation), detention (isolation), and study (education). This is consistent with the existing literature on crime and desistance. In this literature, it is stated that human agency or a major event in the life of a recidivist (for example a marriage, military service, or an imprisonment) can lead to the desistance from crime (Farrall, 2004; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Nuytiens et al., 2008). However, it remains uncertain whether human agency indeed played a more important role in de-radicalization than family, as was stated by our respondents. Perhaps our respondents pointed out de-radicalization factors such as human agency or education as more influential than family influence because this makes them active actors within their own de-radicalization process. This would enhance their self-esteem and would add to their new (positive) identity.

But again a more latent influence seems to be at play: the formers mentioned that the counterarguments that were given by their parents were memorized, and were used once they started their de-radicalization process. Moreover, family members were available to support the change that came from the individuals themselves and formers stated that the support that

their parents gave during the de-radicalization was indeed helpful. This confirms the earlier finding of Bjørge and Horgan (2009) that mobilizing family members may make the process of disengagement easier, as there would be someone to fall back on outside the radical scene. It is also consistent with research on desistance from crime, which also showed that support from family members helps people to quit deviant behavior (Farrall, 2002).

Implications for future research

A better understanding of the underlying processes causing radicalization, disengagement and de-radicalization may offer possibilities for countering and reinforcing these processes. The empirical data in this research show that parents can play a latent role in both the radicalization and de-radicalization process. Future research could take these findings into account in further exploration of the complex dynamics of radicalization and de-radicalization. For example, this study points towards parental support, not as a main cause, but as an important condition for de-radicalization. This raises the question of whether people without any support also de-radicalized. Or, perhaps the support could also come from different significant relationships such as those with friends, siblings, or a partner. Further research could explore this issue.

Another track in the research could be a further examination of the answers of our respondents. Most of the respondents replied that they perceived no parental influence on the radicalization or de-radicalization processes. However, it remains uncertain whether the respondents and their family members perhaps downplayed parental influence out of embarrassment, protection, pride, or other reasons.

Practical implications

The government in the Netherlands has started to involve parents in their approach to radicalization by developing an action plan to counter jihadism. Support groups, for example, exist for parents whose child radicalized, and professional upbringing support is to be implemented to help parents raise resilient citizens and prevent them from radicalizing

(Ministry of Security and Justice, NCTV & Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2014). However, this research suggests that parents do not have a direct influence on radicalization and de-radicalization. Still, governmental interference could be appropriate and desirable.

This study suggests that parents have need for knowledge about the different ideologies, and for tools on how to respond to the radicalization in their children, while formers recall that they wanted to be heard and to be taken seriously. Parents in this research felt that they could not counter the ideas of their child without knowledge about the topic. The ideology of young people is usually led by a search for purpose in life, a search for identity and for belonging, and an urge to improve the world. These needs and moral questions are to be addressed and steered in the right direction in order to prevent adolescents and young adults from becoming extreme in their ideology (Van San et al., 2013); our respondents feel that adolescents will search for answers by themselves if there is no one to discuss their ideas and questions with. Bartlett and Birdwell (2010) also affirm that it is important to listen to young people and their extreme ideas, so that they can be critiqued and subsided. Debating their ideas would be a good method to subside extreme ideals, as through debate the adolescents could possibly find out that their ideals do not match reality (Bartlett & Birdwell, 2010). A lack of debate about and attention to these issues may have severe consequences for the influence that parents can have at a later stage (Sieckelinck & De Ruyter, 2009; Van San et al., 2013). Governmental family support in radicalization should therefore perhaps focus on empowering parents to take on their children's moral quest, so that they can provide the necessary support (someone who listens) but also control (e.g., provide counterarguments, show alternative perspectives, and preserve boundaries when needed). All in all, our findings do not suggest that parents cannot play a role in preventing radicalization or in contributing to the de-radicalization process. Our respondents pointed out that parental support and parental advice indirectly influenced their de-radicalization. Moreover, the involvement of parents could consist of listening and talking to their children, educating them, and helping them to find their way toward a meaningful life (Sikkens, 2014).

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Appendix

Topic list Formers and Families

Age
Occupation
married/single
with/without children

Ideals

Which ideals / ideology?
When was the first time you came into contact with these ideals?
How? Any role model?
What was so appealing about these ideals?
How did these ideals develop?
How come you became so involved?
How far were you willing to go to fulfill your ideals?

Household

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

Parent(s)

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

Upbringing

Attachment → How was the relationship with your parents? Did you spend a lot of time together?

Support → Could you talk to your parents about problems, worries, uncertainties?

Control → Did you normally tell your parents about your whereabouts? Did friends visit you at your house? Did your parents know, who your friends were? Were your parents at home a lot?

Rules and regulations → Did you find your parents strict? Or easy? Were there many rules at your house? What kind of rules?

De-radicalization

When did you start changing your mind?

How did you become less radical / less engaged?

How did you experience this process? How long did it take?

Who was the most important person, influencing your route to de-radicalization?

Family

How did your parents, and other family members, react upon you becoming less radical / engaged?

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

What kind of support did they offer you during this process? (emotional, practical etc.)

What role did this support play in your de-radicalization?

Safety net

Did you or your parents seek professional help?

Were you offered any professional help during your process of radicalization- and/or de-radicalization?

How did you experience this (lack of) support?

Were there any others who have supported you during your de-radicalization or disengagement?

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

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