
Signs of Concern about Islamic and Right-Wing Extremism on a Helpline against Radicalization

Jennie Sivenbring^{a1}

^aPh.D. Researcher. The Segerstedt Institute, University of Gothenburg

Abstract

Few initiatives and actions for dealing with and countering violent extremism and preventing terrorism focus on offering support to individuals who know people who are at risk of becoming involved in a violent extremist milieu. In Sweden, the non-governmental organization (NGO) Save the Children was commissioned to set up a support helpline specifically for these individuals. This study analyzed 98 documented helpline cases dealing with Islamic and right-wing extremist milieus, and explored what causes concern about radicalization as well as the similarities and differences in the causes of concern for these two milieus. The analysis reveals a somewhat normative radicalization discourse as a concern in Islamic extremism focused on religious practice and potential cognitive factors, while concern in right-wing extremism primarily occurs when a youth has joined an organization or practiced activism.

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Introduction

There are some generalized truths and discursive conceptions surrounding the issues of extremism and radicalization. One of these is that terrorism and violence are always preceded by extremism and radicalization and that individuals at risk can be identified by the observation of risk indicators (Borum, 2011; Sedgwick, 2010). In the current global “war on terrorism” (Hodges, 2011), governments all over the world have been forced to broaden their recognition of actors who can be useful in efforts to prevent radicalization and terrorism. The task of preventing violent extremism (PVE) is no longer a matter for security services alone,

¹ Corresponding Author Contact: Dr. Jennie Sivenbring, The Segerstedt Institute, University of Gothenburg, Box 115, SE 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden; Email: jennie.sivenbring@gu.se

but also for family members, teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, civil society actors, and religious organizations and their representatives (Ragazzi, 2017).

Although evidence of the success of interventions intended to prevent and counter extremism and radicalization seems difficult to validate (Eriksson, Beckman, & Sager, 2018; Feddes & Gallucci 2015), there are many initiatives, programs, and interventions aimed at preventing extremist crime and violence. Most of these are targeted at professionals who meet young people in their everyday working lives, but there are also initiatives aimed at supporting those who may be affected by violent extremism. Some of these initiatives are run by governmental institutions and agencies, and others by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A number of organizations offer individual counselling and support via helplines for relatives and friends of individuals who are being radicalized (Koehler, 2017), and there is some research supporting the importance of such services being available (Fukkink, Bruns, and Ligtvoet 2017; Koehler 2017; Williams, Bélanger, Horgan, and Evans, 2018). One of the organizations offering such a helpline is *Save the Children Sweden*, which was commissioned by the Swedish National Coordinator Against Violent Extremism to manage a national helpline to support individuals with their concerns about radicalization and violent extremism. The objective of the helpline was not only to offer emotional and practical support but also to put relatives and professionals in contact with local agencies, practitioners, and NGOs that could advise and assist them. The individuals who access a helpline are often concerned about something that they experience as being out of the ordinary, and it could be of interest to ask: What is the behavior of concern?

This study is based on 98 documented cases of concern related to violent extremism and radicalization handled by the Swedish branch of the *Save the Children* helpline. It focuses on signs of concern to callers who requested support on questions related to Islamic and right-wing extremism. Thus, the aim of the article is to explore a contemporary discourse on concern about radicalization by analyzing these cases and addressing the following research questions:

- What are the signs of concern about radicalization cited by individuals who contact a helpline, and what can these tell us about the radicalization discourse?

By exploring this topic, the similarities and differences in the signs of concern related to Islamic versus right-wing extremism are also considered.

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Assessing Individuals at Risk

As Heath-Kelly (2013) has argued, dominating knowledge and discourses about radicalization and extremism produce and legitimize policy and actions that are in line with the explanatory discourses. Apparently, there are differences between CVE as a reactive countering approach and PVE as a proactive preventive approach that have emerged as a subfield in the struggle against terrorism (Romaniuk, 2015). In intertwining these different approaches, some mistakes have been made, for instance when security measures have been incorporated into social environments. Previous studies have shown that preventive measures may run the risk of becoming counterproductive in their sometimes anti-democratic practices (Kundnani, 2015; Mattsson, 2016; O'Donnell, 2016; Thomas, 2016). In some instances, attempts to safeguard democracy have turned into contests between democratic values and human rights, which have given rise to significant academic criticism. One such criticism concerns the task given to frontline personnel, for instance, educational staff in the Western world who have found themselves gradually being transformed into the eyes and ears of the security services as they have been given a responsibility to use lists of indicators of risk, and to observe, investigate, and report suspicious behavior and signs of radicalization in their students (i.e., Lindekilde, 2012; Mattsson, 2018; O'Donnell, 2015; Ragazzi, 2017).

To detect when a young individual, no matter the reason, is at risk of coming to or doing harm, and to intervene is of great importance of course. The ethical guidelines for

schools and social services generally oblige professionals to intervene when someone is showing signs of being at risk (Mattsson, 2018; Rousseau, Ellis & Lantos, 2017). Theoretically, individuals who are identified and assessed as being at risk can then be offered access to interventions (Sarma, 2017). However, the task (which in some places is an obligation) to observe, investigate and sometimes report signs of radicalization is a new task that might be plagued with problems. In schools for instance, it can be experienced as a degradation of teachers' professionalism as educational experts, forcing them to function as informants, which can hinder the relationship between students and teachers. This can be a serious consequence. Studies have also shown that students experience that they are not allowed to or do not dare to express their religious or ideological beliefs in school because they feel at risk of being reported for them (O'Donnell, 2016).

Furthermore, the signs of radicalization that teachers or other professionals are supposed to detect seem to have little scientific basis (Gill *et al.*, 2014; Monahan, 2017; Thomas, 2016). Also, they are critiqued for being too individualistic and for not taking social context, background or psychological aspects into consideration (Desmarais, Simons-Rudolph, Brugh, Schilling & Hoggan, 2017; Sarma 2017; Knudsen, 2018). As acknowledged by Rosseau *et al.* (2017) when they considered the role of health, social services and educational interventions within the war on terror context, vulnerability or distress among youth may sometimes manifest itself with the same signs listed as signs of someone being at risk of becoming radicalized. Policies that advocate increased surveillance and identification of young individuals at risk have not led to improved identification of potential future offenders. "Instead these measures have shattered the trust in the education system not only for targeted students, but also for their parents and peers" (*ibid.* p.2).

In an analysis of risk assessments in England and Wales, Knudsen (2018) discusses some of the more commonly used assessment tools and refers to them as "radicalization snapshots of a person's psychology at the moment an assessment is being carried out; possibly sharp and accurate, but nonetheless narrow and frozen in time" (*ibid.* p8). These

radicalization snapshots are used to evaluate a person's probable future and enable a translation of this probable future into possible actions for preventing potential violence.

Among important issues related to risk assessments, Sarma (2017) points out that there needs to be a clear specification of what it is that is supposed to be predicted and also that a risk assessor needs to have both experience of, or expertise in, how to assess risks. In Swedish policy and national action plans against radicalization and extremism (SOU 2013:81), in cases of concern professionals are referred to additional material for conversational support. The conversational support issued by the national coordinator against violent extremism (*Nationella samordnaren mot våldsbejakande extremism*, 2014) lists signs of concern that involve the use of symbols, changes in attire, new friends, starting or quitting smoking, downloading or sharing extremist material on the Internet, growing facial hair, or getting a tattoo. The same indicators or signs are also used in a majority of the action plans formulated by Sweden's municipalities for dealing with extremism at the local level (Andersson Malmros & Mattson (2017), and also for example in the Swedish Police's support handbook for preventing violent extremism (*Polisen*, 2017). Furthermore, professionals are encouraged to take note of individuals expressing radical attitudes, giving voice to conspiracy theories, or legitimizing violence as a means of effecting social change. The materials also give examples of attitudes, opinions, and relationships that should cause concern. These are said to be evident when young individuals express intolerant views, reject democratic principles, and are convinced that their own views are the only relevant ones, and when they try to argue and convince others to accept their ideas. Furthermore, expressing conspiracy theories, perceiving others as enemies, and vocalizing hatred against certain groups such as Jews, Muslims, Swedes, capitalists, immigrants, or homosexuals, are listed as signs of concern. However, as they are formulated, the criteria and behavioral indicators of radicalization are not related to actual risk but to potential risk. Thus, teachers and other professionals are sometimes asked to hypothesize a future crime that will probably never be committed (Mattsson, 2018). In the words of Knudsen (2018, p.9) "The condition of being radicalised comes to resemble being 'pregnant' with a form of risk that is potent but as of yet unrealized: while possible outcomes

for the radicalised are not unlimited, the condition's precise materialisation will depend on the effectiveness of the interventionist actions".

Another frequent criticism is that in the wake of contemporary discourses on Islamic terrorism across Europe and the increased securitizing of society, PVE practices tend to focus on Muslim communities. Numerous studies and reports have shown how European Muslims are being targeted as a suspicious community, and discourses of suspicion are reinforced by policies and action plans aimed at PVE (Coppock & McGovern, 2014; Guru, 2012; Human Rights Watch, UK, 2016; Kühler & Lindekilde, 2012; Kundnani, 2015; Ragazzi, 2017). Such practices and discourses may lead to a further construction of ideas and perceptions of who might be at risk of becoming radicalized.

Involving the Social Environment in PVE

Relatives, friends, and family have been recognized as "associate gatekeepers" who can be of essential value in ensuring that preventive actions and programs reach their target groups (Williams, Horgan, & Evans, 2015). The social environment, especially one where family and friends are present, is often the space in which radicalization evolves and where it can first be noted (Koehler, 2015). It is also recognized that pro-social ties such as family and friends are of great importance to the efficacy of any intervention (Koehler, 2017). Thus, there are reasons for recognizing the importance of involving the social environment in early interventions against extremism. Studies of former extremists and their families have also shown that relatives and friends play a crucial support role for those who disengage from extremist violence. The desire for a "normal life" seems to be one of the most important factors for individual disengagement, and social support from "the outside" and the mobilization of family support are the most decisive aspects for the will and ability to leave (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Carlsson, 2016; Koehler, 2017). Therefore, there are good reasons to focus on supporting family and other relatives in the struggle against extremism and radicalization, and to not use them solely as sources of security information.

However, having a friend, family member, or loved one involved in extremism can cause worry, shame, and grief. Furthermore, relatives are often stigmatized and ostracized due to the actions or attitudes of their loved ones (Guru, 2012; Koehler, & Ehrt, 2018; Simi, Sporer, & Bubolz, 2016). Also, peers might be reluctant to reach out for help as they may fear getting themselves or their friend in trouble (Williams, Horgan, Evans, 2015). Based on their interviews with the parents of deceased foreign fighters, Koehler and Ehrt (2018) described how families became branded as criminals and how, in some cases, child welfare services, assuming that the parents had violated their fiduciary or parental duty of care, attempted to take the remaining children from the family. The authors concluded that “it is very hard to understand some of the extraordinary stress being put on those families in addition to their loss due to the lack of structured support” (Koehler & Ehrt, 2018, p. 192). It is also easy to understand why some of these families and friends might find it hard to trust government agencies.

In researching the behavior of 119 lone actors convicted of preparations for or committing terrorist crimes, Gill, Horgan, and Deckert (2014) showed that, in most of these cases, there was someone close or related to them who was aware of the perpetrator’s grievances with society. In 80% of the cases, someone knew about the perpetrator’s extremist ideas and attitudes. Furthermore, nearly 50% had told their family and friends that they intended to commit a terrorist crime, and 40% had a history of previous involvement in criminal acts. It is noteworthy that a large proportion (32%) of the felons had a history of psychiatric disease or mental illness. These figures say little about who the terrorist or extremist is, and in line with other studies in this area, Gill *et al.* (2014) found no common perpetrator profile of the terrorist offender in the literature. There are no control groups of similar delinquencies with which to make any comparisons or establish any correlations. This led the authors to conclude that individuals who commit terrorist crimes are characterized by *what they do*, rather than by *who they are*, and what they do seems to be known by family and friends.

In Sweden, as in the other Nordic countries, frontline practitioners are believed to have a certain role in preventing young individuals from harming others or coming to harm themselves. However according to Herz (2016), frontline personnel should be given the chance to create safe environments for meeting young people in their everyday professional work. Frontline personnel have a unique position and are significant when it comes to strengthening young people's trust in the adult world. Recent studies have shown that a number of scholars agree that this privileged position can be utilized to work with democratizing practices in teaching for instance, and cite the use of dialogue and controversial issues as a pedagogical tool for democratization (Mattsson, 2018; O'Donnell, 2015; Thomas, 2016). According to the Swedish Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*, 2018), support for individuals involved with violent extremist milieus is sometimes met with skepticism by the general public. There are obvious complications associated with supporting individuals who have or have had extremist views. Social workers also found that there are ambiguities in how cases of extremism or radicalization should be handled and how personnel should act when they come in contact with individuals who are involved with extremist milieus (*Socialstyrelsen*, 2018).

Helplines

In an effort to protect and support citizens who have concerns related to extremism, several initiatives have arisen in Europe. Some of these are helplines or hotlines where individuals can call and speak with experts about their concerns. According to Koehler (2015), this kind of support can be regarded as effective, especially when it comes to outreach and availability. The importance of this kind of service is also in line with Williams, Horgan, Evans & Bélanger (2018), who advocate affording gatekeepers and vicarious help-seekers with a channel for communication that can circumvent their fear of getting in trouble.

Sweden's *Save the Children Helpline* was not intended as a deradicalization program. It was established based on previous experiences of providing helplines for asylum seekers and

refugees, and intended to be a support service for those in need of someone to talk to, and those who needed support in handling a difficult situation. It was also meant to guide individuals and to establish contacts between intervention providers and the individual believed to be at risk of radicalization. Thus, the helpline's purpose was to help the families and the friends of people tempted by radical extremism. There are some studies showing that helplines can do just that. For instance, Williams *et al.* (2018) concluded that support helplines can fulfill a need by empowering those who are aware of a friend or relative who has the intent to commit a terrorist crime and helping them to intervene before an attack can occur.

In studies of helpline counselling for people in need, Fukkink *et al.* (2017) highlighted the positive impact of helplines due to their immediate and accessible support for children and young people. Helplines come at a fairly low cost, are easily accessible, offer anonymity, and provide quick responses and support for those in need. Furthermore, helplines have the potential to fill the void when professional interventions are absent or inadequate. In studies of Australian helplines, Burgess *et al.* (2008) explored the mental health status of people who turn to a helpline. The researchers found that those who initiated contact with a helpline were often experiencing loneliness and experienced higher degrees of suffering from worries, depression, and anxiety than the general population (see also Ingram *et al.*, 2008). Thus, it could be argued that there is a need for helplines to help people deal with their worries and anxiety. Helplines providing psychosocial support for young individuals in need of compassion, support, and advice may be of great importance to those seeking meaning and guidance. Among the incoming calls, abuse, violence, mental health, and problems with the adult environment have been found to be the most common topics (Burgess *et al.*, 2008; Fukkink *et al.*, 2017; Ingram *et al.*, 2008).

Although helplines have an important function, Ingram *et al.* (2008) concluded that, given a heterogeneous help-seeking population, helplines tended to have a narrow area of focus and a limited outreach. They noted that “[w]ith many people in need of mental health, emotional support, and substance abuse services, crisis hotlines are in a position to provide

services to a large number of people” (Ingram *et al.*, 2008, p. 672). However, the study indicated that callers felt safer, calmer, and more confident after being in contact with the helpline than they were before initiating the contact. The researchers also stated that there is every reason for using additional techniques, such as online chat services, in order to reach the younger population. Online communication can provide anonymity, making some people feel safe, protected, and more prone to speak about themselves. Fukkink and Herrmanns (2009) compared children’s experiences of support provided by telephone with support received online and found that there were no qualitative differences. Some of the help-seekers preferred to chat online, while others preferred to speak to someone on the telephone. In both instances, children stated a higher degree of well-being and a lower degree of concern after being in contact with a helpline service. Their choice of chat or telephone support was based on their own preference, which suggests the importance of having various communication alternatives to choose from (Williams *et al.* 2015).

Studying the Save the Children Helpline Against Radicalization

In the spring of 2017, Sweden’s former national coordinator against extremism and radicalization commissioned the NGO *Save the Children* to manage the national telephone helpline for individuals with concerns about radicalization and extremism. According to a Swedish Government Official Report (SOU 2017:110), there was a need for a preventive initiative targeting relatives and friends of individuals at risk of becoming radicalized. The helpline was to function as a coordinating service to direct individuals to the appropriate local services within their area. The directive for the helpline also stated that those operating such a helpline should be experienced in giving support and guidance to people in need. To make it clear that the helpline was intended to aid those who had concerns for others at risk of being harmed from involvement in a violent extremist movement, *Save the Children* named the helpline *Orostelefonen om radikaliserings*, which roughly translates as the “radicalization concerns helpline” (Rädda Barnen, 2017). The helpline primarily focused on support services

for relatives, friends, and family, but also functioned as a support for individuals worried about themselves being attracted to an extremist ideology or becoming involved in something that they were not able to handle. In Sweden, this was the only initiative of its kind, and this kind of support for relatives and friends was not offered by any other governmental organization or NGO. Professionals who worked with individuals causing concern were likewise welcome to contact the helpline. The helpline was evaluated by *Save the Children* in 2017 (*Rädda Barnen*, 2017) and the report shows that individuals who make contact often return for more support and advice. The statistical material in the report also show that individuals of all ages caused concern, and that the need for support seemed to be steadily increasing.

In the spring of 2018, the newly commissioned *Swedish Center for Preventing Violent Extremism* took over the responsibility for handling issues related to violent extremism and radicalization in Sweden. In order to centralize these efforts, they decided to initiate a support service for professionals experiencing dilemmas related to extremism or radicalization. At the same time, they decided not to provide any financial support to the *Save the Children* helpline. For a period of time, the helpline was maintained by the organization's internal funding, but, by the end of 2018, the helpline was closed down. The new helpline run by the *Swedish Center for Preventing Violent Extremism* does not address the families and friends of radicalized individuals; thus, this support is now lacking.

Through cooperation and an agreement between *Save the Children* and the *Segerstedt Institute* at the *University of Gothenburg*, a joint study about the helpline as a preventive initiative was begun in early 2018. At that point, the aims of the study were to evaluate the incoming cases and the support provided by the helpline, and to facilitate methodology development and improve the efficacy of the helpline. Also, as Fukkink, Bruns, and Ligtoet (2017) stated, studies of helplines can offer a small window into people's hearts and minds. The concern about radicalization expressed by those affected by it can offer such a window, and provide some important insights for the radicalization discourse, and on how to handle concerns and potential risks in the future.

This study focused on those cases where individuals were concerned about radicalization, and we attempted to determine what made them fear that others in their immediate vicinity were becoming radicalized. For this purpose, we utilized the documentation systems that the counselors were already using, or rather the documents produced in the system. The researchers did not have access to the digitalized documentation system. The counselors documented the calls in anonymized case files, noting gender and age (if this was mentioned), and the type of concern of the individual in focus. No names, places, or other identifiable information were mentioned in the documentation. In some cases, the counselor documented personal reflections or specific quotations from the caller that they found significant for the particular case. The data used for this study consisted of the counselors' textual documentation of the calls made in the 98 cases and not the actual calls themselves. This meant that neither the counselors nor the researchers were aware of any identifying personal data about the individual of concern in the documented cases. This way of using secondary empirical data (the counselors' recollections and documentation of the cases) could be a limitation of the study, since the data was translated twice (by the counselor and by the researcher). Considering the nature of the material, this was also a way of minimizing the data collected and thus safeguarding the privacy of the individuals involved. Since the material was also translated from Swedish into English, this further protected the identities of the actors involved.

During the period from February 2017 to May 2018, the *Save the Children* helpline handled in total 154 cases of concern about radicalization and extremism. Some of these were one-time callers, while others returned to the helpline or followed up the conversation by seeking more support and guidance. Some of the cases went on for over six months. In total, the documentation involved more than 360 calls made within the scope of the 154 cases. Of these, 43 cases were categorized by the counselor as general concerns or information calls, three cases were defined as related to left-wing extremism, and 98 cases were concerned with Islamic and right-wing extremism and/or radicalization. Thus, the results were based on these

98 remaining cases: 62 of these were categorized as concerns about Islamic extremism, and 36 cases were categorized as concerns about right-wing extremism.

Methodology

The results of a qualitative study are predicated on the questions asked and the precision of the tools used to conduct the analysis. In this study, one such important question, following the work of Gill *et al.* (2014), was *What do they do?* — what the individual did or was doing that caused the caller's apprehension and concern about radicalization. Furthermore, it was about *Who are they?* — the individual aspects that emerged from the signs of concern and which occurred as differences and similarities within the radicalization discourse.

To make the data manageable, the analysis began with a thematic coding based on the different milieus and how the signs of concern were documented by the counselor in accordance with *what they do*. In line with Potter and Wetherell (1987), the initial coding had the pragmatic aim of giving the material a framework in order to reveal its potential focal points. In reading the coded material, the form, limitations, and core of the caller's concern in relation to extremism and radicalization emerged. Concerns related to *what they do* and *who they are* were coded into nodes using a computerized analysis program for qualitative data.

One of the objectives of this study was to explore some signs of concern about radicalization and to see what this could tell us about the radicalization discourse. This was not meant to imply a discourse analytical approach. Rather it is about the theoretical standpoint that discourses are evident in the public debate and in the shared common language people use to make a problem or an object of concern manageable and possible to speak about (Foucault, 1971). In this case, it was about saying something about the discourse itself in order to examine its external limitations and the conditions for its existence, and to some extent explore what the discourse is creating. Thus, the methodology was more an analysis of a discourse than a textbook discourse analysis.

Results

The aim of this study was to explore a contemporary discourse of concern about radicalization by addressing the research question: *What are the signs of concern about radicalization cited by individuals who contact a helpline, and what can these tell us about the radicalization discourse?* Also, the similarities and differences in signs of concern related to Islamic and right-wing extremism were a focus of the analysis. The results section gives a brief overview of the case material, followed by a more in-depth analysis of the relevant themes. The excerpts used in the text are meant to exemplify recurring themes and are taken from the counselors' documentation of the cases. The quotations have been translated by the author to approximate the meaning of the original quotations as these were documented in Swedish.

The Cases

The case material consisted of 98 cases where callers initiated contact with the helpline. The calls came from various actors as illustrated by the following table.

Actors	Concern about Islamic Extremism	Concern about Right-Wing Extremism
The individual him/herself	1	4
Relative or friend	17	25
School personnel, nurse, social worker, psychologist, Police	35	6
Personnel at home for unaccompanied minors	6	1
Civil society actor	3	
	= 62 cases	=36 cases

Table 1. The callers and the number of cases related to the milieus of concern

The common denominator among those who made contact with the helpline was that they were concerned about someone with whom they came into daily contact, and also found themselves in a situation where they lacked guidelines on how to act or behave around the young individual. They were often seeking help that could not be found within the ordinary social services. Their purpose in making contact was to obtain support and advice; occasionally, there was a need to be relieved of the responsibility of being the one in possession of potentially harmful information if anything were to go wrong. The 62 cases related to Islamic extremism came from relatives and from teachers or educational institution staff, but most frequently from social workers concerned about a young individual, often a young man (primarily someone who was legally defined as an unaccompanied minor), who they feared was becoming radicalized. Of the remaining cases, six calls came from the Swedish Police, psychiatrists, and civil society actors. The 36 cases concerned with right-wing extremism came primarily from friends and family, but also from individuals who were concerned about their own position and attraction to a right-wing ideology or organization.

However, how these concerns were expressed varied, and were sometimes focused on the desire to talk about and justify extremist views. The remaining calls about right-wing extremism were made by educational institution staff and social workers.

In comparison, Islamic extremism attracted the most attention from external (professional) callers: 71% of the calls related to Islamic radicalization came from such actors, i.e., not family or friends. This may be a consequence of the fact that there are many unaccompanied refugee minors involved in these cases and that these youngsters are often in contact with social workers and caretakers who have a professional but not necessarily any emotional responsibility for them (Stretmo, 2014). There is also some general societal suspicion surrounding unaccompanied refugee minors, especially when they are boys. Boys are generally regarded as potential troublemakers (Hedlund, 2018). In addition, contemporary discourses on radicalization that turn young Muslims into potential future terrorists cast suspicion on them (Coprook & McGovern, 2014; Thomas, 2016). Furthermore, young refugees often do not have the social network of family and friends that the radical nationalistic youngsters in the analyzed data had. These youngsters are often born into and raised by their own families. Seventy percent of the callers concerned about right-wing extremism were relatives and friends.

Callers that defined themselves as family or relatives, irrespective of the ideological milieu of concern, stated that extremism and radicalization was a taboo subject that caused a certain amount of shame and guilt. As one parent stated when conversing with one of the counsellors: “As a parent, you feel worry, frustration, and grief, and it feels good to be able to talk about it.” The notion of guilt and grief is common among relatives who experience that their loved ones are attracted to an extreme ideology (Brittain, 2009; Spalek, 2016). It can be emotionally difficult to discuss these issues with friends or coworkers, and parents often feel that they are viewed as complicit and thus run the risk of being ostracized (Guru, 2012). In the following section, we group the signs of concern into (re)occurring themes, based on what the individuals did that caused concerns about radicalization.

Signs of Concern: What They Do

When posing the question *What do they do?* the objective was more specifically: what is the behavior of concern? (Sarma, 2017). In analyzing these behaviors, similarities were linked to religious practice, ideological belief, mental health, social relationships, and interactions on the Internet. Even if these signs and themes were evident in concerns about both right-wing and Islamic radicalization, there were noteworthy internal differences dependent on who the individual of concern was.

Likewise, there were more evident differences and distinct themes concerned with the explicitness of expressing extreme or radical attitudes and religious practice. There were also differences in how actions could be interpreted related to the nature of the extreme milieu in focus for the caller which reflected radicalization as being a normative construct. Thus, it was essential to determine what a suspected extremist did that was interpreted as signs of radicalization and thus caused concern.

They Express and Practice Religious or Ideological Beliefs

Signs of concern related to expressions and practices of religious and ideological beliefs took a different form depending on who the subject of concern was, who the caller was, and what the milieu in focus was. This was most evident in the differences between external (professional) and internal (related) callers.

The exercise of religious practice was the most common sign (mentioned in more than half of the cases) of concern among the cases related to Islamic extremism. The caller, who was most often a professional in social care or at an educational institution, expressed concern about a young individual becoming more isolated as a result of him converting to Islam. As young boys convert to or get more involved in religious Islam, they can change and become more actively religious. Boys who pray, fast during Ramadan, perform ritual ablutions (*wudu*), read the Quran, or spend time in a mosque were often assessed as being at risk of becoming radicalized. Furthermore, changes in clothing or growing facial hair caused concern about such boys, especially when they were in institutional care. One caller had concerns

about a 17-year-old unaccompanied minor refugee boy who had expressed grievances over his circumstances and displayed a number of signs of mental illness. In the narrative, there were no signs of extremist attitudes or expressions of violence, but the caller was still concerned and stated: “Well, he’s religious. He has a beard and wears black clothes.”

In the analyzed data, along with physical attributes the expression of religiosity was sometimes the only reason for the caller’s concern. In another case, an unaccompanied minor caused concern because he performed ritual ablutions before praying, and the caller feared that he had been radicalized. Stretmo (2018) pointed out that, for some unaccompanied minor refugees, religion is a central part of their lives, and something that can offer comfort and strength, and that affording time and space for praying can be crucial to their well-being.

The Islamic religiously profiled terrorist deeds in Europe and the measures that have been taken to prevent future such deeds may have contributed to making Islam and Muslim communities targets of suspicion (Awan 2014; Kundnani 2015). By a discursive envisioning of young Muslims as “other” and as potential future terrorists, they may be constructed and positioned as individuals who are especially vulnerable and at risk (Copprock & Mc Govern, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2016; Sivenbring, 2017). The assumed connotation of Islam that connects it to radicalization and terrorism appears to be a figure of thought that might exclude other explanations.

In the cases concerning right-wing extremism, and when the first contact with the helpline was initiated, the individuals causing concern had often already taken some action. They may have joined a right-wing extremist organization, participated in demonstrations or in violent confrontations with opposing groups, or participated in manifestations for a radical extremist cause. They often expressed racist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, or homophobic attitudes and practiced hate speech in various ways. If we look at established ideas about radicalization as a process (Borum, 2011; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Moghaddam, 2005), we can see that the caller, who is usually a relative or a close friend, turns for help when more explicit signs of radicalization toward right-wing extremism occur. In one case, a parent contacted the helpline due to concern for a boy who had recently engaged with a right-

wing extreme organization and had been involved in violent activism. The parent described him as becoming more violent and aggressive at home and that he said, “Hitler was a true leader.” In succeeding conversations with the counselor, the parent described an ongoing search for help and support in the local community where the only answer given was that these cases were “not on our desk.”

With regard to concern for right-wing extremism, the caller’s primary worry was that the radicalized individual would cause or come to harm, or that he or she would commit crimes. In the cases related to Islamic extremism, the caller was primarily concerned about individuals becoming radicalized and the risk of them committing acts of terrorism in the future. This fear was often combined with feelings of guilt and uncertainty regarding whom the caller could contact to get help and support to deal with the problem.

They Show Signs of Mental Illness

When callers made contact via the helpline, they were encouraged to speak about the person they were concerned about. In many of the cases, the callers described some kind of mental health issue, such as a neuropsychiatric or psychiatric diagnosis. Descriptions of school failure, truancy, isolation, self-harm, anxiety, depression, and paranoia occurred along with references to bipolar disorder, suicide attempts, and general feelings of hopelessness and distrust in others. However, when the concern was Islamic radicalization, these issues were posed as a secondary concern or mentioned in passing while speaking about radicalization as the real problem. This insight might contribute to (re)constructing a radicalization discourse that assesses individuals at risk, according to their mental health status along with their perceived ethnicity, nationality, and political or religious convictions. In the long run, this approach could be counterproductive. As Rosseau *et al.* (2017) argues, an increase in social stereotyping in relation to the war on terror, along with discrimination and exclusion, can fuel psychological distress among youth.

One example of how mental health declines in the wake of a radicalization discourse was a call from an actor working at a home for unaccompanied minors. The caller described a

young boy from a minority group from Afghanistan. His narrative of flight (Stretmo, 2014) spoke of abuse, kidnapping, and sexual exploitation. The boy carried a lot of anxiety, shame, and guilt because of these experiences. The supervisor called the helpline, concerned about whether the boy was becoming radicalized as he had recently written the following post on social media: “Sweden is a terrorist state that sends children back to Afghanistan.”

In this case, there was no other evidence of extreme or radical attitudes or talk of violence. However, the post on social media could be perceived as a radicalization snapshot (Knudsen, 2018). What he expressed was a personal view. In the summer of 2017, the time that this call was received, the Swedish government had started to send refugee minors back to Afghanistan, and applications for asylum were being rejected *en masse*. At the same time, controversial medical examinations were conducted in order to determine the biological age of unaccompanied refugee minors, and deportations were being conducted by the Swedish Police and the Swedish Migration Agency. In respect to this particular boy, the main worry was radicalization; whether the boy, due to previous experiences and current circumstances, was scared, frustrated, and worried about his own future was not even considered as the primary reason for his actions. Sometimes professionals may, as Rousseau *et al.* 2017 puts it, “be ill-equipped to deal with the hurt stemming from diverse social context” (ibid. p. 2). There have been some studies indicating that youngsters with experiences of war, violence and flight are more prone to developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than people in general (Gurwitch, Kees, & Becker, 2002). Studies of unaccompanied minors in Norway showed that about half of the children that arrive fit the descriptors of PTSD (Jensen, 2015).

Occasionally, it appears that the concern about radicalization and terrorism is overshadowing individual difficulties and grievances, and this also seems to be the case for mental health and well-being. Radicalization as a rational explanation is seemingly the most prominent of all the possible explanations for what is causing the caller’s concern for younger individuals. Even if some of the individuals who have committed terrorist crimes suffer from mental illness or psychiatric disease, there is no direct relationship between mental health and the execution of terrorist crimes (Gill *et al.*, 2014). There are millions of people suffering

from mental health issues who never turn to extremism or violence. As stated by Desmarais *et al.* (2017), identifying associations between individual factors and terrorism as an outcome is of limited pragmatic use. “Although most terrorists are young, single men (...), for example, not all young single men are at heightened risk for terrorism” (ibid. p. 196).

In cases with a focus on right-wing extremism, issues revolving around mental health were sometimes described by relatives in terms of neuropsychiatric diagnoses. In these cases, mental illness was posed as an explanation for the individual being attracted to an ideology that could provide simple solutions to complex problems. Mental illness was also illustrated by some individual callers who turned to the helpline with concerns for themselves and their own attraction to a right-wing milieu. One of these lone callers was a young man who was afraid of being drawn back into a white supremacist organization that he had exited from earlier. He described an upbringing with absent parents and dealing with relatives’ alcohol and drug abuse, which was the reason for him being currently in foster care. He said that he was struggling with anxiety, self-harm, lack of self-control, and outbursts of aggression. He also stated that his previous engagement with the organization was mostly about finding an identity and his attraction to the skinhead culture and its working class ideals. He had no racist attitudes, but said that he had recently become aware of what he called a “reverse racism.” Also, he was scared; scared of going back to the movement and that he might be forced to commit violent acts and carry weapons. These thoughts reentered his life in the aftermath of the terrorist crime in Stockholm in April 2017, when five people lost their lives as Rakhmat Akilov, inspired by Islamic terrorist organizations, ran them down on the street. In addition, the boy was left by his girlfriend, and he said, “I need something to fight for, or I will kill myself.” As Desmarais *et al.* (2017, p. 196) state, “Indeed, grievances can provide the basis for extremist ideology and serve as an activating factor.”

The boy’s story was framed by the need for connection and social cohesion, an idea that is present in theories of radicalization and among the reasons why young people are attracted to violent milieus. Furthermore, his story was stereotypical in its coherence with theories of why young people join right-wing extremist movements. However, this is seldom

provided as a rational explanation when speaking about attraction to Islamist extremism. Simi, Sporer, and Bubolz (2016) stated that the attraction of right-wing movements lies beyond their ideologically simplistic explanatory models, and that the possibility of a vicarious family, along with status, excitement, and identity, are the primary reasons. There may also be personal disapproval of individuals of other races, ethnicities, religions and/or sexual orientations related to conflicts from childhood. In interviews with young defectors from neo-Nazi milieus, Kimmel (2007) showed how young individuals got a feeling of purpose and of being in control of their own lives through their affiliation with white supremacist groups. In line with Kimmel, Bjørge (2005) found that young Nazis are attracted by the prospect of belonging to a group and that racism becomes the common denominator, but not the primary reason for their affiliation with the group. Exciting attributes, the use of symbols on clothing, partying, and aggressive white power music were described by the young individuals in Bjørge's study as pull factors. Mattsson and Johansson (2018) affirmed this notion while also focusing on push factors, such as their informants' (former Nazis) beliefs that their emotional and social needs were not being met in their lives outside of the group.

They Interact on the Internet

Various aspects of engaging in activities on the Internet were frequently mentioned as signs of concern. Callers were primarily worried about not having control over or knowledge of what their young people were engaged in, and they described them as spending too much time alone in their rooms interacting on their computers. Uncertainties often emerged as these adults felt that they had lost control and supervision of what was going on behind closed doors. In some cases, callers were concerned about individuals who had posted and shared extremist material on social media.

In cases involving Islamic extremism, watching videos of imams and clips with extremist content caused concern, especially if the young person was also engaged in religious activities. Signs of concern were that youngsters were searching for news from Syria

and Iraq, watching or listening to clips with loud voices, watching propaganda videos from terrorist organizations, posting an ISIL/IS flag on Facebook, or posing in black clothes for photos. Callers were worried about how extreme images and content on the Internet were affecting the views and attitudes of the young. Searching for and sharing extremist material is one of the signs of radicalization that methodologies and manuals encourage professionals to take note of. On the one hand, the Internet and messages that are disseminated and communicated online cannot by themselves create extremist views in individuals. On the other hand, digital channels of communication and social forums on the Internet can enhance and encourage extreme and radical world views and conceptions that have already started to grow (Askanius, 2017).

Interaction on the Internet and social media was also an evident source of concerns about right-wing extremism. Downloading and sharing extremist material on social media, posting racist messages or images on Facebook, participating in certain discussion forums, and posting on right-wing extremist online forums were signs that caused concern. The accessibility afforded by social media sites on the Internet, and the visibility offered by social media, have changed how people can participate in different groups, interact and exchange information. As stated by Alava, Frau-Meigs, and Hassan (2017), engaging in hate speech and propaganda and participating in various forums and right-wing extremist organizations and groups online have been made more accessible to a common and wider audience. By comparison, for the cases revolving around Islamic radicalization, these concerns are more evident, and there was no doubt about what types of activities were causing concern. With suspected right-wing radicals, online interaction is commonly done in the open. This openness causes even more concern as relatives and friends are made aware of what is going on and often react to and question the actions of the entire family.

In these cases, there was also evidence of young people's resentment of mainstream media and notions that it presents fake news. Callers described how their young relatives expressed hate and used derogatory phrases about public news services. In the data, there were statements to the effect that the tabloids are lying, the mainstream media cannot be

trusted since they have been “infiltrated by the left”, and that “all newspapers are owned by Jews who lie to the Swedish people”. Furthermore, there were expressions of only trusting media that are supported by Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin. The idea that society and its establishments have been sold out to “the others” (Jews and non-Europeans) behind the back of “the people” was discussed by Lööw (2016). She stated that most ultra-nationalistic and racist groups argue that the media are the bearers of a stigmatized truth and that interpreters of the people’s true will are being silenced and hidden by a corrupt establishment.

Rieger, Frischlich, and Bente (2013) concluded that the media and propaganda can influence emotions, perceptions, knowledge, and actions. This does not mean that extremist propaganda can be the sole reason for radicalization, but that propaganda can be an influential factor. Along with other factors, digital propaganda can be one of the pieces in a radicalization jigsaw puzzle (Hafez & Mullens, 2015). Thus, digital propaganda can be effective due to its availability and its chances of capturing and maintaining the individual’s interest in extremist ideas and milieus. Through interaction online in discussion forums and through social networks, individuals can experience coherence with like-minded people and gain support for their views and ideas. In Sweden, the website of the neo-Nazi organization *Nordiska Motståndsrörelsen* (Nordic Resistance Movement or NMR) *Nordfront* (the North Front) and the hate site *Samhällsnytt* (Society News) are notable for their publication of hate speech in both their articles and information and in their dissemination of user-generated material (Kaati, 2017). The activity on these forums has shown a significant increase over the past several years.

What about girls?

Overall, the data have primarily supported the argument to speak about concern for boys and young men. The documentation from the calls to the *Save the Children* helpline mainly concerned boys, but around 20% of the cases were about concern for young women. In these cases, the concerns were similar, no matter what the milieu. Concern for young women was

about their changing and being affected or influenced by a man or a new partner that the family or friends had little knowledge about or control over.

The narrative for the cases where the caller was concerned about religious extremism often followed a storyline where the young woman started to change after meeting someone new. She started to wear traditional clothing, such as the veil or hijab. She distanced herself from family and friends, and she stopped her usual activities and focused more on religion and tradition.

In these cases, the callers were concerned with the possibility that the woman was going to marry and possibly leave the country for a conflict zone. They sought guidance and support about how they should handle and approach their relative or friend. They had a need to find out more about her plans and intentions, without risking that she would turn away from them, which could mean a potential loss of both the relationship and control. In one case, the caller described a young relative who had recently converted to Islam and had become more isolated: “She went somewhere and became a Muslim; it escalated really quickly.”

Travelling abroad caused concern no matter what the purpose of the trip might have been, and of course, the purpose was not always known to the caller. Concern for young women travelling to conflict zones was not unjustified. Aasgard (2017) estimated (supported by official reports) that since 2013, about 80 women have left Scandinavia to join Islamic terrorist organizations in Syria. Many of these women were under 20, and many of them were risking severe injury or death (Saltman & Smith, 2015).

In the cases where the concern was categorized as right-wing, the narrative also started with a sudden change when the young woman met a new partner who was always portrayed as the reason for her change and for her committing to a white supremacist organization (in these cases, there was always an organizational commitment). A common theme in the narrative was that there had been no previous signs of racism or hate speech, and the callers were expressing their own, and the surrounding community's, surprise and sadness about the development. One parent contacted the helpline about their 17-year-old daughter who had joined the Nordic Resistance Movement after she met an older man who was a longtime

member: “She has never expressed anything like this before she met him. We are in shock!” In this case and in similar cases, the relatives feared that the young woman might have been manipulated and that she was being drawn into something that she could not handle or control. The callers needed guidance in how they should address their relative or friend, without risking an escalating conflict that might lead to her turning further away from them.

No matter the milieu in focus, there were some stereotypical perceptions in the radicalization discourse. Young women were regarded as helpless victims without any agency of their own. They were not considered to be responsible for being attracted by an extremist ideology or milieu. There was always a male partner who was the reason for the woman being drawn into a situation where she did not belong; that is, she was tricked and manipulated. In this sense, young women were being projected as passive victims without agency or will. Stereotypical perceptions of young women as passive (Skeggs, 2004) make it impossible to think that they might join of their own free will and an ideological desire to effect change. Another important aspect is that both the Islamic and the right-wing extremist milieus are defined by hypermasculine ideals that in turn generate a feminine ideal focused on motherhood. The feminine mission is to give birth to and raise future representatives of the nation and the people (Kimmel, 2007).

Conclusions and Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore a contemporary discourse of concern for radicalization by addressing the question: *What are the signs of concern about radicalization cited by individuals who contact a helpline, and what can these tell us about the radicalization discourse?* By exploring this topic, the similarities and differences in signs of concern related to Islamic versus right-wing extremism were also considered.

As shown in the results from the data analysis, signs of concern are not only dependent on what the suspected extremist does, but also on who he or she is. This is true even if there are similarities with regard to what the suspected extremist does, such as expressing or

practicing ideological beliefs or religions, showing signs of mental illness, and engaging in certain activities on the Internet. It is apparent that these activities are what used to be known as “normal teenage activities.” However, even if these are (re)occurring themes, there are internal differences depending on what milieu the individual is suspected of being radicalized toward.

The data indicate that concerns about Islamic radicalization revolve around individuals who convert to Islam, turning religious practice into suspicious behavior and behavior that could be regarded as unfamiliar or divergent compared to general Swedish practices. The callers were concerned about the young person’s well-being, but also about the harm that could be caused by the individual if he or she had in fact been radicalized. There was an obvious fear of being the one having information about a potential extremist if something were to happen. Thus, there are significant reasons for exploring how perceptions of these young religious Muslims are affected by discourses of second-hand terrorism (Comer & Kendall, 2007). In line with Rosseau *et al.* (2017), we tend to perceive risk through the lens of current cultural fears. It is not too much of a stretch to conclude that contemporary fear of terrorist deeds is aligned with Islamic terrorist organizations and the crimes committed by these groups in recent years in Europe. This fear has most probably affected the general public’s perceptions of what a terrorist is and what signs to be aware of.

Concern about right-wing extremism was primarily related to young individuals joining a white supremacist organization or them making clear statements that support racism, anti-Semitism, and hate speech. In such instances, the caller’s main concern was how this could be stigmatizing for their loved ones or for their families and that their young would come to or cause harm. In comparison with concern about Islamic extremism, these cases reached the higher levels of a metaphorical radicalization staircase (Moghaddam, 2005)

One similarity in what suspected extremists do that caused concern was that they displayed changes in behavior and well-being. Sudden isolation from others was one of the most frequently mentioned signs of something not being right. This could be regarded as general concern for a young person’s well-being that affects the adults’ world when their

young people no longer seek their advice and guidance, but instead turn to others. These others may belong to extremist milieus, but they can also be representatives of an organization, community, religious leaders, or other adults who offer a sense of belonging and stability (Bjørge, 2013; Mattsson & Johansson, 2018). One factor that is important to shed more light on is how concern for radicalized young women was expressed by the callers. In the cases handled by the helpline, young women were primarily described as passive victims who had been easily manipulated by men.

Discourses dictate the conditions for truth and the possibility and relevance of speech (Foucault, 1971). In the documented data, radicalization has a slightly different meaning depending on which particular concern is being addressed and the potential damage that could be the consequence of the apprehended radicalization. There are significant differences in how radicalization is perceived by the potential gatekeepers and vicarious help-seekers who make contact with the helpline. Their concerns about religious extremism focus on suspicions based on young Muslims practicing their religion, where fasting, praying, and reading the Quran are interpreted as possible signs of radicalization. In the words of Roy, “terrorism does not arise from the radicalization of Islam, but from the Islamization of radicalism” (2017, p. 6). Concern about right-wing extremism occurs as young individuals express right-wing ideals or attitudes or when they join an organization. In these cases, we need to recognize that one of the differences between the milieus is that right-wing extremism is almost completely based on ideological premises that are generally rejected by the normative society, while Islamic extremism is related to a wider category of religious ideologies that is a part of many surrounding cultures (Koehler, 2017, p. 79).

On another level, girls and young women are given a special position within the radicalization discourse, where the specific milieu or ideology has little or no importance with regard to the concerns about young women. In these cases, it seems that the elements contributing to the loss of control over the young women seem to be of greater significance. In light of this, radicalization becomes a normative construct that is given different meanings depending on the individual or milieu in focus. The radicalization discourse holds a strong

position and has the prerogative to make the actions and behaviors of (certain) young people intelligible. This was evident in the helpline documentation of instances where the fear of Islamic radicalization overshadowed other signs of concern for the youngsters' well-being or mental health.

Returning to the CVE discourse and the helpline as a preventive initiative for dealing with violent extremism, there is every reason for further investigation of how these interventions can support family and friends as associate gatekeepers (Williams *et al.*, 2015). As this study indicates, information and knowledge about how to get support and guidance is lacking among peers and relatives. Knowing that colleagues, friends, and family can be a “first line of defense” against violent extremism (Koehler & Ehrt, 2018), helplines and other supportive structures offered by governmental or non-governmental organizations can be of great importance in empowering them to be such a defense and enabling them to make a difference.

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