

From 'de-radicalisation' to 're-politicisation' in youth welfare work?

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Abstract

Background. After the attacks in European cities by home-grown terrorists the concept of 'radicalisation' became intertwined with issues of integration and radical Muslim beliefs. The cultural-psychological narrative became dominant in policy and practice. We examine the counterproductive effects of the new prevention policies on youth welfare work in Flanders (Belgium).

Methods. These effects are examined through an international literature study, a discourse analysis of Flemish key policy documents and case-studies in 3 Belgian youth welfare work organisations.

Results. Youth welfare organisations show an ambiguous reaction. Deradicalisation policies are rejected because of their stigmatising effects on the youngsters and the undermining of their trust bond with youth workers. However, their pedagogical approach, focused on individual identity development, involves a paradox: it protects the youngsters against the stigmatising effects of the radicalisation discourse, but trumps out more politicising work on discrimination and inequality.

Implications. This should bring out renewed attention for politicising practices in youth work to support young people in social vulnerable situations in expressing their strong grievances about stigmatisation and discrimination. We provide a first draft of an international framework for this 'repoliticisation approach' as an alternative to the dominant 'deradicalisation approach'.¹

Keywords

radicalisation – politicisation – prevention – violent extremism – youth welfare work

¹ This paper is based on the synthesis report of the Research project PWO 2016-2017 "Prevention of radicalisation through positive identity development in youth welfare work" of the Artevelde University of Applied Sciences: Van Bouchaute, B., Vanhove, T., Görgöz, R., Debaene, R., & Kerger, D. (2018). *Deradicalisering als uitdaging voor het jeugdwelzijnswerk*. Gent: Arteveldehogeschool. Part five on the implications is based on ongoing development work on alternative practices in the prevention of violent extremism in the first phase of the 'Orpheus' project funded by the Interreg Program of the EU. <https://www.interreg2seas.eu/nl/offline-and-online-radicalisation-prevention-holding-back-extremism-and-upholding-security>

1. Introduction

In Belgium the concept of 'radicalisation' was introduced as a policy reaction on the phenomenon of foreign fighters in Syria – with more than 500 foreign fighters Belgium was confronted with a relatively high number of young people joining ISIS - and later on the attacks by home grown perpetrators in Europe. The Paris attack on Charlie Hebdo (January 2015) served as a catalyst for a stronger political discussion and the implementation of new 'deradicalisation' policies². In its apparent simplicity the concept of 'radicalisation' was very attractive for policy makers in their attempts to deal with the growing public fear.

In accordance to the Belgian institutional context the policy work was divided: while the Belgian federal government focused on repression based on her competence for security and police, the Flemish government developed **prevention policies** based on her competence for welfare and education. In the Flemish Parliament a *Resolution on the fight against violent radicalisation* (May 2015) was almost unanimously voted – only the far-right *Vlaams Belang* opposed. The Flemish government developed an *Action Plan on the Prevention of radicalisation processes that can lead to extremism and terrorism* (April 2015). The involvement of local authorities, social work and civil society organizations was expected in these prevention efforts.

Specifically for young people with a Muslim background, the Ministers responsible for Integration and Youth lanced a **project call** on "*Positive identity development in young people* in the context of the prevention of radicalisation (July 2015). The Ministers claimed to reject religion as the determinant of radicalisation and aimed for the enhancement of positive identity development of young people at risk of becoming radicalised. This was considered an explicit task for Youth Welfare Work in Flanders and Brussels.

Youth welfare work exists of more than 100 organisations, mostly in urban areas in Flanders and Brussels. Their umbrella organisation *UitdeMarge – 'OutoftheMargin'* - (2019) describes their main tasks in working with children and young people in a socially vulnerable situation by means of four functions: (1) they realise a group-oriented offer for children and young people in leisure time and strengthen the social participation of vulnerable groups (2) they pay special attention to the physical and psychosocial well-being of these target groups, through their own working method and by cooperation with other welfare services; (3) they build actively a bridge to other areas of life, such as education, the labour market, social assistance, culture, sport, justice and (4) they are committed to the realisation of the social fundamental rights of the target group by advocacy on behalf of the target group and by supporting their voice in the social debate.

The project call led to fierce debates in different organisations and in the umbrella organisation *UitdeMarge (OutoftheMargin)* (Henkens, Kastit, & Debruyne, 2015; Debruyne, 2015).. While the recognition of the importance of positive identity formation was welcomed, the inclusion of this in deradicalisation policies was considered to produce **negative effects** for two reasons: (1) The relationship of trust between youth workers and young people in the sphere of leisure comes under pressure. It is precisely this relationship of trust that gives youth workers the opportunity and the mandate to support those young people in areas of life in which they experience social exclusion due to early school leaving, unemployment, poverty and discrimination. (2) By focusing on one group of practicing Muslim youth as a risk group, attention is drifting away for other potential forms of violent extremism and stigmatisation is threatening to increase.

² In an international context the term 'de-radicalisation' is rather ambiguous, because it entails both the *prevention* and the *curation* of radicalisation – only the latter is referred to internationally as deradicalisation or the real 'de-radicalisation'

2. Research question

In this context our research project took a reflexive stand, aiming at detecting and analysing:

(1) the impact of the radicalisation discourse and 'de-radicalisation' policies within youth welfare work organizations (top down). In particular, we investigated the potential threats of increased stigmatisation and discrimination against Muslim youth and the deterioration of the relationship of trust with youth workers;

(2) the problem definitions and methodical approach on 'radicalisation' developed by youth workers and their organizations themselves (bottom up). We looked at this approach from two perspectives: the direct pedagogical relationship between young people and youth workers, and the societal relationship of these organisations with other relevant organisations, governments and with wider public opinion.

3. Methodology

The research project consisted of three sections:

- an international literature study on the history of the concept of "radicalisation, on the definitions and explanatory models for radicalisation and on the impact of the concept in policy and public opinion;
- a discourse analysis of two central documents in Flemish prevention policies: the *Flemish Action Plan for the prevention of radicalisation processes that can lead to extremism and terrorism* (Homans, April 2015) and the *Resolution of the Flemish Parliament on combating violent radicalisation* (May 2015);
- three case studies in professional youth welfare work organisations (1) working in large cities (2) with young people from migrant background (3) who gave an explicit reaction on the project call of the Flemish government and (4) that work in local contexts with different policies on the prevention of radicalisation. The case studies were conducted by 5 researchers and 15 third-year social work students (specialisation social policy). Each case study involved the analysis of documents, the observation of activities and meetings, and semi-structured interviews with frontline youth workers (4), team leaders and management (2) and a local expert. Given the sensitivity of the research theme and the importance of a safe environment for the respondents, their anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed in our deontological code.

4. Results

4.1. Literature study: a controversial concept with counterproductive effects

Following the attacks on the Twin Towers, it became very difficult for terror researchers to talk about the root causes of terrorism. American commentators claimed that the search for root causes only excused and justified the killing of innocent civilians. The attacks were considered as a result of 'the Evil' In the terrorists (Sedgwick, 2010). By introducing the term 'radicalisation', European security experts made a discussion about the root causes possible again (Expert Group, 2008; Sedgwick, 2010; Schmid, 2013).

Following the attacks in Western cities by home grown perpetrators, this concept was confined to an internal process of radicalisation by Muslim youth and mixed with the current debate on "failed integration of Muslim minorities" (AIVD, 2004; Kundnani, 2012; Fadil, 2016).

This explanation model emphasizes the absorption of extreme religious beliefs by individuals in a long-term radicalisation process (Colaert, 2017). This individual-religious model is widely widespread and has much official support. In a shift away from the tradition in terror studies, where the explanation was sought in a three level account (e.g. Crenshaw, 1981) involving factors of Individual motivation and belief systems (micro); decision-making and strategy within a terrorist movement (meso) and the wider political and social context (macro), the study of the 'new terrorism' focused more on the individual level centered around the question: why do some individual Muslims support an extremist interpretation of Islam that leads to violence? Religious ideology was considered not only as a marker, but even as the starting point in a linear process towards terror. Laqueur (2004) illustrates this shift with his idea of a 'cultural-psychological disposition', with religious beliefs as key 'indicator' combined with individual and social-psychological 'risk factors'.

Since then, thus in the last 15 years, the same academic questions were asked and researched over and over again: what is radicalisation; (how) is it linked to terrorism; how can the process of radicalisation be understood; what are individual, group or societal factors and dynamics of radicalisation; how can degrees of radicalisation be measured? Despite its academic omnipresence, the very notion of radicalisation remained "ill-defined, ambiguous and controversial" (Coolsaet, 2011). There is a lot of scientific debate about the concept of radicalisation (Coolsaet, 2011; Sedgwick, 2010; Schmid, 2013; Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010) and its underlying assumptions and explanatory models (see, among others, Borum, 2011; Schmid, 2013). Critical scientific voices argue for a cautious approach when applying this concept in prevention policies

In contrast to this academic uncertainty, caused by both theoretical controversy and lack of empirical evidence, the concept of 'radicalisation' primarily became *"the master signifier of the late 'war on terror' and provided a new lens through which to view Muslim minorities."* (Kundnani, 2012). Prevention policies were developed and mainly targeted towards the 'vulnerable youth' and Muslim communities, with considerable involvement of local authorities, social work and civil society organizations. The radicalisation discourse gained a strong spread and impact on public opinion, policy making and prevention.

This impact of the radicalisation discourse involved three main risks (Kundnani, 2015; also de Koning, Fadil & Ragazzi, 2018): (1) the public opinion can be disrupted: 'being muslim' or 'having radical ideas' is enough to be suspected of political violence; (2) social polarization is strengthened: Muslims, immigrants, refugees... are stigmatised; (3) civil rights are undermined with measures and practices that affect privacy and put 'suspect' citizens under increasing control.

4.2. Discourse analysis: ambiguities involve risks for prevention policies

The discourse analysis of the two key documents in Flemish prevention policies on 'radicalisation' showed three main ambiguities that involve risks for prevention policies.

(1) The problematisation of radical ideas

The term **radicalisation process** suggests that acts of terror are the logical result of a whole evolution in the beliefs of an individual towards a fundamentally dangerous mindset, leading to the fatal decision to commit terror. While this seems plausible at first sight, we know that some acts of terror happen without this process – the 'flash radicalisation' - and that no one could predict this action. Moreover, radicalisation process assumes the existence of a domain of radical beliefs that carry within them the seeds of violence. The underlying assumption is that ideologies exist that are violent in itself, as ideas. In this 'idealistic' perspective on terror people must be protected from dangerous beliefs, while the societal context fades into the background.

According to the action plan, violent **radicalism** must be called a serious threat to the democratic constitutional state, and it must vigorously be contested. But the quote "*If we want to counter the violence, we must counter the radicalisation*" in the resolution calls for the idea that any form of radicalism should be tackled. It remains unclear what radicalism means, when an opinion is radical and when this radical opinion is considered as a step towards political violence. With this unclear term of dangerous 'radicalism', the road is open for suspicion and limitation of any form of radical expression. Channels for expressing grievances are reduced because these are perceived as radical and hence dangerous.

(2) The ambiguity on (Muslim) radicalisation

In the policy documents there is a constant ambiguity about **Muslim radicalisation**. While some quotes suggest that radicalisation in the most broad sense must be tackled and warn for the stigmatisation of the Muslim community, we read how in the Action plan only cooperation with Muslim leaders is organised, how the resolution of the Flemish Parliament strives for the promotion of a European Islam and the establishing of a network of Islam experts to spread a moderate counter-narrative. Problematic is that terrorism in the name of Islam is explained by 'a radicalisation of Islam', which suggests that Islam is dangerous in itself, and that this danger manifests itself finally in its radicalisation

(3) Prevention is narrowed to early detection of individuals at risk

"The ultimate goal is to detect young people and young adults at risk of radicalisation as quickly as possible and keep them aboard in our society." In this quote of the Action Plan, two boundaries are shifted. The boundaries are broadened: the 'risk of radicalisation' is an undefined and thus endlessly comprehensive category, because the question is ultimately: who does not run that risk? And the boundaries are limited to **detection** of young people at risk. This is a highly problematic interpretation of prevention: young people at risk of being infected must receive special treatment, without considering root causes in society as a basis for susceptibility to such seduction. Within the given context, it will be very difficult not to label whole groups or areas as potentially dangerous.

Both documents explicitly state that prevention can only fit in an inclusive society where everyone feels at home and is given equal opportunities. In that sense, racism, discrimination, unqualified exit from school ... are recognised as root causes for radicalisation. It would be logical that this be translated into concrete policies. In the Flemish Action plan however, the recognition of root causes is immediately followed by the observation that deprivation or subordination not necessary lead to acts of terror. Although this statement is true – simply referring to the difference between 'causality' in the social sciences and natural sciences – it seems to be a justification why prevention

measures explicitly do not target societal root causes. Indeed, the **individual approach** is remarkable, with assertiveness or resilience training for young people or support for young muslims in the quest for positive identity. The risk here is that prevention efforts are limited to an individual psychological and pedagogical approach.

4.3. Case studies: reluctance and a pedagogical paradox

4.3.1. The impact of deradicalisation policies in youth welfare work organisations (top-down)

The youth workers involved in our case studies were critical towards the radicalisation discourse and reluctant to cooperate in prevention policies on this issue. Three counterproductive effects were mentioned.

1/ Problematisation of radical opinions.

"Young people with radical ideas are not helped, but pushed further in that corner, by harassing them and asking incriminating questions" (youth worker)

The simple idea that opinions can be radical and therefore dangerous, has major effects on young people in social vulnerable situations, especially Muslim youth. By connecting ideas with violence, it becomes even harder for these young people to express grievances about discrimination, unfairness or racism. To stand up and claim their right to be treated as equal can easily be considered as radical and dangerous for society.

2/ Problematisation of 'Muslim radicalisation'.

"We used to be Belgians with Moroccan backgrounds, now we are Muslims. The spotlight is on us: today because of religion, yesterday because of the colour of our skin" (team leader)

Furthermore, being a Muslim is considered as a risk factor. They become suspicious and have to be checked and surveilled. Statements about neighbourhoods that need to be 'cleaned up' - where people are talked about, such as rubbish - add a territorial stigma to those who have already been stigmatised. Racial profiling by the police becomes the norm. Young 'Muslim looking' people are constantly being checked because they are perceived to be dangerous. This makes young muslims feel themselves haunted and stigmatised. The new problem of 'radicalisation' strengthens the image that has existed for some time, strengthens public opinion and the authorities, but also influences the self-image of residents, especially young Muslims. Youth workers express the increased level of polarisation between the 'white Us' and the 'Muslim them'.

3/ Early detection of radicalisation risks.

"You need the angry father, but also the soft mother to be able to raise a child. The angry father, in the form of the police, must guarantee safety and punish crimes. However, our mobile youth workers, as soft mothers, must, above all, act as a point of contact for their target group." (youth worker)

The tasks with regards to 'early detection' for youth welfare work, implies that all prevention should be aimed at the prevention of specific problems. This way, all Muslim youth become suspicious because 'you never know who'. The risk assessment becomes endless. The professional youth workers feel the pressure to let go of their professional confidentiality and give personal information about vulnerable people to the authorities. This gravely undermines the trust relationship between youth and youth worker: who are they going to trust, if what they tell might end up with the police or justice?

Table 1. Overview of counterproductive effects in Youth Welfare Work

Risks in 'deradicalisation policies'	Counterproductive effects in Youth Welfare Work
"Problematic radical opinions"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing grievances become signals of radicalisation • Narrowing channels for claiming rights
"Problematic Muslim radicalisation"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Bad integrated groups' are targeted • Muslim communities are suspect and under surveillance • Stigmatising Muslim youth: 'Us' versus 'Them'
"Early detection of radicalisation risks"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevention is aimed at early detection • Radicalisation risks are undefined and endless • Pressure on professional confidentiality that undermines the trust relationship

(2) The problem definitions and methodical approach in youth welfare work (bottom-up)

In their view on the root causes of political violence, youth workers criticise the individual-religious explanation model and stress **macro-explanations** both in the geopolitical relations as in the domestic situation. In our own society they see continuing deep inequalities, both open and subtle forms of racism, exclusion and discrimination. Institutions in our societies keep failing in giving equal opportunities, and our schools are not making much progress. Ethnic profiling by police officers is considered as a self fulfilling prophecy: if you focus on surveillance of migrants, you will find and even create more security problems in these groups. If young people are considered as troublemakers, they will act accordingly to this expectation.

Although the organisations indicate macro-explanations, they mainly focus on individual resilience and raising individual competences of youngsters. They give the lack of time and staff as a reason for the absence of structural work on the levels of education, housing and employment while they acknowledge the importance of more structural work.

The pedagogical project of youth welfare work is experiencing negative pressure by the demand to participate in the prevention of radicalisation. Professionals show resistance and criticism, advocate for maintaining trust relationships with young people. Because of the strong grievances in their target group, youth workers call for more space (both physically and symbolically) for legitimate forms of rebellion.

However, their pedagogical approach, based on building trust, warm relationships and building positive identity, involves a paradox. On the one hand it serves as a protective shield for stigmatised young people, also against the harsh effects of deradicalization policies. But on the other hand, this pedagogical project closely ties in with the individualistic rationale behind mainstream prevention of radicalisation and trumps out more structural work.

5. Implication for the pedagogical project in youth welfare work: repoliticisation?

This research conclusion could mean that the core of the **pedagogical project** of youth welfare work is at stake. Socially vulnerable young people with a migration background not only experience serious grievances - about stigmatisation (immigrant, migrant, muslim), discrimination and racism, marginalisation, and so forth... In addition, they experience less and less space to express these **grievances**. From the viewpoint of the dominant radicalisation discourse this can easily be seen as a dangerous polarising step in their radicalisation process. In that sense we think that youth welfare work could develop more praxis of supporting young people in finding ways of non-violent expression of these grievances and of developing claims as equal citizens in our society.

Precisely the public character of expressing grievances refers to the concept of **politicisation**. Politicisation refers to practices that contribute to the organisation of the public debate and disagreement about how we organise our society together. That public disagreement is intimately linked to a vital democracy (Oosterlynck, Hertogen, & Swerts, 2017). Various forms of consultation with professionals and organisations as experts or stakeholders or various discrete forms of lobbying or advocacy fall outside our delineation of politicisation – precisely because they miss that public character.

Because the concept of politicisation is closely linked to the public sphere in an open democracy, politicisation can be understood and elaborated differently, depending on the vision of that democracy. Some prefer dialogue, others struggle strategies. Some want to influence policymakers, others target the broader public opinion in society. Within practices of politicisation of grievances with vulnerable youth, different approaches can be used and even combined, as long as they contribute to the public debate on how we organise our living together in society.

The concept of politicisation refers to a specific interpretation of '**citizenship**' (Menarg, 2018). The fight against violent extremism, citizenship education is being put forward as an effective way to strengthen the individual and collective resilience of young people (Thomas 2016). Within the RAN network this was made concrete in 2015, first in the "Manifesto for Education - Empowering Educators and Schools" and later in one of the nine RAN working groups under the name [RAN-EDU](#). Both the *Paris Declaration* and the *Manifesto for Education* state that the contribution of education in the fight against 'radicalisation' lies in the promotion of citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination throughout education.

But with that emphasis on citizenship a new question raises: **which view on citizenship** is used? Too often, citizenship is seen as a fixed model, with clear expectations that can be placed on 'the good citizen'. A streamlined one-size-fits-all pedagogical approach should then ensure good democratic citizens. This view is close to the more 'securitarian' approach to prevention. More fruitful, however, is the approach in the '**agonistic citizenship model**'. In the agonistic citizenship model (e.g. van den Brink 2005, Sieckelinck 2017), social and cultural conflicts are seen as fairly normal phenomena in pluralistic societies. These conflicts must therefore be given the necessary space to be played out both in the internal dimension and the external dimension of safe spaces.

An agonistic view of politicisation re-evaluates the conflict as a source of a vital democracy (Mouffe 2005, 2013). A democratic society is too divided to allow a fixed consensus on the structure of society. Moreover, an imposed consensus covers those inevitable contradictions. An important challenge here is that these contradictions in a democracy do not lead to an enmity between 'we' and 'them.' That is the difference between 'agonism' and 'antagonism': in a shared democratic society it is important to be able to turn that enmity into a **conflict between legitimate opponents**. So we have to work on a shared democratic space where we can fight each other as opponents in a non-

violent way. Otherwise contradictions become absolute and the 'enemy' is hated, attacked and destroyed.

In an agonistic view it is important that the **existing order of society can be questioned**. Every existing order, even if it is meant to be honest, fair and just, always and inevitably implies injustice. Politicisation then means that this existing order can be disturbed and claims can be made. This is based on an understanding of democracy not so much as a system but as an important starting point (Rancière 1987, 1990, 2005). That '**democratic principle**' is that everyone should speak out and participate in the discussion about the organisation of society ... as an equal to anybody: rich or poor, young or out, established or newcomer, male or female ... everyone can have a say. It is clear that this democratic assumption disturbs and undermines all social hierarchies in existing society. At strong moments of politicisation, invisible people become visible, voices that have not yet been heard become audible, people can make a claim that could not be articulated before. Apart from the successful result of that expression, it is in itself valuable that a person or a group can and may participate as equal to anyone else. Democracy as a principle can be a valuable starting point for practices of politicisation in youth welfare work.

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