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Factors of Individual Radicalization into Extremism, Violence and Terror – the German Contribution in a Context

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The question as to why individuals join extremist groups, radicalize or even go on to commit acts of terror have been a focus of research for many decades and a multitude of researchers from different disciplines have advanced theories and hypotheses in an attempt to provide an answer. The German literature on the topic has also offered a number of promising contributions worth discussing in the context of general international literature. We begin by examining factors pertaining to the individual as such (personality features, cognitions and emotions) and then move on to address theories that focus on the interaction between individuals and their social environment and long-term socialization processes.

Keywords: radicalization, extremism, personality, socialization

The question as to why individuals join extremist groups, radicalize or even go on to commit acts of terror have been a focus of research for many decades and a multitude of researchers from different disciplines have advanced theories and hypotheses in an attempt to provide an answer. Broadly speaking, approaches have looked at either individual or structural features, as well as combinations of the two. Personality traits, identity issues, biographies, developmental paths and socialization are but a few examples of the kinds of explanatory concepts and processes proposed so far. The German literature[1] on the topic has also offered a number of promising contributions that are worth discussing in the context of general international literature. We begin by examining factors pertaining to the individual as such (personality features, cognitions and emotions) and then move on to address theories that focus on the interaction between individuals and their social environment and long-term socialization processes.

Radicalization is a contested concept and numerous definitions have been advanced in the literature. In his review of social science theories of radicalization into violent extremism, Randy Borum (2011, 9) makes the important point in differentiating between the cognitive and the behavioral level, pointing out that the latter, i.e. violence, is not necessarily an inherent component. He sees radicalization as a "process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs", whereby "[s]ome people with radical ideas and violent justifications—perhaps even most of them—do not engage in terrorism".[2] Early radicalization models attempted

[1] This refers to literature in German, or literature in English which analyses German case studies.

[2] For more on the discussion surrounding the concept of radicalization in relation to other phenomena, see Abay Gaspar et al. 2020 in this issue.

to identify linear pathways (e.g., Silber and Bhatt 2007) whereas subsequent scholarship highlighted the irregularity, uniqueness and multi-dimensional nature of radicalization processes (e.g., Horgan 2008; Ranstorp 2010). Ever since 9/11, we have seen an emphasis on jihadi radicalization[3] in Western societies, with significantly less work addressing right-wing radicalization in this context, while investigations into left-wing extremist actors mostly date back to the 1990s (e.g., della Porta 1992). In selecting literature for the present synthesis report, we focused on peer-reviewed German-language publications supplemented by those in the English language. We used a list of key words to browse through a series of research databases[4] and identified 107 publications in English and German for the researched time period of 1986 to 2018. Of these, 45 address theoretical underlying assumptions from a social-science perspective while 52 develop empirical and theoretical models and typologies of radicalization processes and test existing ones against empirical data; the remaining publications comprise policy papers that explicitly address prevention and deradicalization measures or entail accounts of individuals who abandoned extremism.

1 An extremist personality

Several decades of psychological research on radicalization and extremism have failed to identify an extremist personality or profile. In fact, as Schmid (2013, 20) points out, most terrorists are clinically normal despite the immorality of their acts. That said, research has identified personality traits that are below the threshold of pathology and appear to be associated with involvement in extremism.[5] For example, distinct friend-foe structures have been identified as a disposition towards radicalization processes (Borum 2014, 291; Saimeh 2017, 212–213). Of particular relevance in this context are rather narrow worldviews that reduce the perceived ambivalences and complexities of individuals (Saimeh 2017, 219). Furthermore, impulsive traits along with intense emotions that are difficult to control increase the risk of violent action in line with an extremist ideology (Meloy and Pollard 2017, 1644). Similarly, studies have found that heightened anxiety, aggression, impulsiveness and limited openness to experience are typical for individuals who radicalize (Gøtzsche-Astrup 2018: 96, citing Brandt et al. 2015).

Another example is *narcissistic personality styles* (Grabska 2017, 179) that often arise due to a lack of parental attention (see also Yusoufzai and Emmerling 2017). These are characterized by an inflated sense of self, a feeling of grandiosity, a lack of empathy and a tendency to easily be hurt emotionally.[6] For these individuals, devaluing and dehumanizing others have a stabilizing effect on one's sense of self-worth (Saimeh 2017, 213). One example of an individual with a narcissistic personality style (though not diagnosed as personality disorder) is the Norwegian attacker Anders Breivik.[7] He presented himself as an omnipotent warrior, a modern version of the Knights Templar, while dehumanizing and devaluating all proponents of multi-culturalism (see in particular, Meoy and Yakeley 2014, 356). Empirical evidence on the influence of inflated self-images is well known in research on self-conceptions and violence (Baumeister 1999; Kotnis 2015). Conversely, training programs in the context of prevention work aimed at boosting self-confidence, empathy and the ability to view things from other perspectives were found to boost resilience against extremism (Feddes, Mann, and Doosje 2015).

One of the features of individual radicalization is deviance from mainstream social norms and values, including the development of a personality that strays from the bounds of "normality" (Zick and Böckler 2015, 7). Individuals with *dissocial personality styles* are typically characterized by deviant norms and social values, as well as sensation-seeking behavior, i.e., the constant urge for new experiences and sources of

[3] In this paper, we understand the term jihad in accordance with a Salafist interpretation to be a religious duty to militarily assist and defend oppressed Muslims.

[4] Google Scholar, PsycINFO and Bielefeld Academic Search Engine (BASE).

[5] We use a broad definition of trait as a personality characteristic and/or structure that is stable over time. Only a few studies on radicalization research differentiate between specific trait theories.

[6] Borum (2015, 293, 299); Feddes, Mann and Doosje (2015); Grabska (2017, 181–182); Meloy and Yakeley (2014, 357, 362); Saimeh (2017, 213).

[7] Anders Breivik carried out attacks in Oslo and on the island of Utøya in Norway on July 22, 2011, claiming the lives of 77 victims. For a study on the link between traits and ideologies in this case, see Rahman, Resnick and Bruce (2016).

excitement, drug abuse, impulsiveness and a proclivity for violence. Empirical findings confirm a connection between dissocial personality patterns, earlier acts of violence, time spent in jail and extremist beliefs (e.g., see Coid et al. 2016). A correlation has also been found between entering into conflicts with the police and sympathies for violent protest and terrorist acts (Bhui et al. 2016). Analyses of radicalization processes among Syrian immigrants in Germany point to a high prevalence of previous criminal convictions for violent crimes and property crimes (60% and 62%, respectively), as well as for narcotics-related crimes (35%) prior to radicalization (Bundeskriminalamt, Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, and HKE 2016, 18). In an analysis of German extremist and terrorist biographies, Saskia Lützinger (2010) and her team reached a similar finding: the sample displayed high affinity for drugs and alcohol and also had previous criminal records. Within a sample of European jihadis, Basra, Neumann and Brunner (2016, 34) likewise found that 65% of all cases considered included a previous history of violent crime. Some other studies concluded that previous violent behavior is a risk factor for subsequent violent acts (Meloy and Gill 2016, 41). Anis Amri, the perpetrator of the attack at a Christmas market in Berlin on December 19, 2016, had also been previously convicted of crimes, including violent ones, and he had been involved in the drug trade. Importantly, we should note that these studies, while providing valuable insights, are not representative for all types of extremism as they only consider jihadis in recent years and lone actors.

An *authoritarian personality* is another construct related to the dissocial personality style that can play a role in radicalization processes. Past research on radicalization has found evidence of a connection between authoritarianism and radicalization. A personality type with an affinity for authoritarian traits is characterized by rigid thinking, subservience and a narcissistic identification with authoritarian leaders. Value-compliant behavior can eventually result in violent acts against targets identified by this type of authority figure (Borum 2014, 287–289; Koomen and van der Pligt 2015, 94–101; Saimeh 2017, 215). Moreover, such individuals are particularly sensitive to threats. They react to threatening environments and an inimical society – of which they are thought to be a victim – by developing a rigid understanding of conformity and values and, in some situations, becoming oriented towards an authoritarian leader with the intention of restoring their own sense of security (Koomen and van der Pligt 2015, 94; Saimeh 2017, 216). In his characterization of fundamentalist mindsets, two additional relevant aspects that Borum (2014, 291) cites are a strong degree of sensitivity to threats in the sense of paranoid mistrust and hypersensitivity with regard to dangers to oneself and the resultant sense of degradation.

2 Cognitions and motivations

The role of particular cognitions and motivations in radicalization processes has also been fervently investigated. Some common findings have referred to decisive events from the past – which lead to fundamental changes in the ways individuals perceive and process reality –and to motivating factors. Empirical studies have produced some evidence for a number of theoretical constructs – but also with contradictory results. *Transformative learning theory* developed by Wilner and Dubouloz (2011) argues that new values, interpretive structures and identities emerge when existing interpretive patterns become incapable of reacting to crises, i.e., the so-called transformative triggers. Critical life events can even lead to a reevaluation of one's own social position, future ambitions and personal relationships on the basis of the newly acquired knowledge. This phase of reorientation is said to be susceptible to processes of radicalization, the precursors of which can include socio-political changes that influence the individual's life context (Wilner and Dubouloz 2011, 423). A study by Lützinger (2010, 28) shows that ruptures, which can be understood as transformative triggers, were exhibited by nearly all of the personal biographies within the study group. As one of the few empirical studies that also considers the connection between critical life events and extremist beliefs within a cross section of the population, the study by Bhui et al. (2016) argues, on the contrary, that no significant connections could be found between critical life situations and increased support for violent protest or terrorist activities.

The *quest for significance* model by Kruglanski et al. (2014) assumes that individuals are essentially on a quest to find and maintain that which they believe to be important based on their (often) culturally determined values, including one's own position and sense of significance within society. According to Kruglanski et al. (2014, 73–74), the perception of having lost one's social significance – particularly with regard to core social relationships – or the loss of significance of a core value can result in a sense of deprivation and an impaired perception of reality, subsequently leading one to search for an opportunity to regain this lost significance. A polarized worldview may mark such a loss of significance, and it can fulfill one's need for closure, i.e., the desire for clear, definitive answers that are free of ambiguities (Kruglanski et al. 2014, 75; Kruglanski et al. 2017, 226; Webber et al. 2017, 2–3). Ideologies play a key role here in that they define radical acts as a legitimate means of achieving these ends (Kruglanski et al. 2014, 77–81; Webber et al. 2017, 2). While the experimental study by Webber et al. (2017) produced empirical evidence using a cross-sectional survey in which the loss of significance in a study group could be successfully induced and compared to a control group, other empirical studies, such as that by MacDougall et al. (2018), show that the quest for identity and belonging cannot alone significantly predict support for violence-oriented organizations.

The *terror management theory* proposed by Greenberg, Solomon and Pyszcynski (1997) argues that threats to one's self-worth can induce processes of radicalization. This theory assumes that an individual's self-worth is embedded within a cultural system of values which is invoked when one faces the condition of mortality salience, i.e., an awareness of the possibility of death or transience. Extremist ideologies offer a simple tool for buffering against the idea of one's own mortality or by imparting an exuberant sense of self-worth (the power of the group). Experimental studies have shown that individuals under induced mortality salience ascribe significantly greater power of attraction and persuasion to extremist views (Frischlich et al. 2015).

A number of years ago, Maxwell Taylor and John Horgan roughly outlined the first semi-rational approach to involvement in terrorism. In his book "The Terrorist" (1988), Taylor draws analogies between involvement in terrorism and involvement in criminality. He adopts the thesis formulated by Cornish and Clarke in *The Reasoning Criminal* (1986) that "the offender benefits from his criminal choices, and that this benefit is the determining factor in his commission of crime" (Taylor 1988, 181). According to Taylor, this benefit does not necessarily have to be material in nature as the individual enjoys "excitement from his activity, status amongst his peer group and confirms his membership of that marginalized group" (ibid.). In this line of argumentation, Taylor borrows further from behaviorism and the work of Burrhus Frederic Skinner, especially concerning the role of expected feedback from one's environment as an explanation for individual behavior. In his textbook on the psychology of terrorism, Horgan (2005) added to this by pinpointing the distinction between participating in offenses and committing certain crimes, for which various sorts of decisions are made. He also emphasized the process character of engagement while pointing to the plurality of decisions involved in such a process (Horgan 2005, 81).

3 Emotions and affects

In addition to personality features and cognitive structures, emotions and affective conditions were also found to facilitate processes of radicalization. As opposed to the concept of feelings, affects refer to consciously processed emotions (Borum 2015). By interacting with personality traits that promote radicalization, emotional states can contribute to the polarization of attitudes (Borum 2014; Koomen and van der Pligt 2015). The connecting element between affective conditions and processes of radicalization are (perceived) threat situations, as mentioned above with reference to one's personality (see Koomen and van der Pligt 2015, 7, 58–59). Koomen and van der Pligt (2015, chap. 3) describe the experience of threat as a core psychological element in radicalization processes. The experience of threat unleashes emotions such as fear, anger and aggression and leads to a desire for escaping this situation. The same applies to feelings of shame, anger and helplessness that arise from experiences of injustice (for an overview, see Borum 2015; Koomen and van der Pligt 2015, 58–66).

As *moral affects*, feelings of degradation, hate, frustration, anger and contempt can promote processes of radicalization when they become categorized as reactions to situations or to the behaviors of others that are perceived to be objectionable in light of one's own morals (Borum 2015: 69; Koomen and van der Pligt 2015, 59–60). Some studies stress that morally perceived insults can evoke narcistic motivations (Borum 2015, 69; Kruglanski et al. 2014, 77; Meloy and Yakeley 2014, 351–352). *Moral affects* may also account for a significant portion of polarization and radicalization processes due to the fact that they lead to a superficial processing of information and to an associated acceleration of conflict escalation (Koomen and van der Pligt 2015, 127). In the comprehensive Swiss *z-proso study* – a cohort study on the social development of children up to the age of adulthood – we find high correlation between moral justification/neutralization and extremist attitudes with a propensity for violence. The connection between direct, affective concerns, such as anxiety and depressiveness, and similar attitudes is notably weaker. However, the evidence that has been systematically investigated to find a direct causal link between affect and radicalization is rather weak. Moreover, the available findings on an affective pathology of anxiety or depressiveness with diagnostic relevance remain inconclusive (Bhui et al. 2016; Coid et al. 2016).

4 Radicalization via interaction with one's social environment

Individual dispositions, emotional states, specific cognitions, etc. are, on their own, not sufficient for explaining radicalization, as the social environment influences their development. To gain a better understanding of the interplay between individual factors, processes and their social environment, socio-psychological approaches can offer some important clarifications. Daniela Pisoiu (2012) developed a model for understanding Islamist radicalization in Europe that brings together the interdependencies between individual and socio-psychological perspectives. It builds on the aforementioned rational-choice approach and combines the latter with *framing theory* from social movement literature. One of its core assumptions is that, similar to the models mentioned above, feedback from one's social environment serves as the primary motivational factor, meaning that reputation, recognition and reward are essential. Pisoiu (2012, 109–110) elucidates how interpretative frameworks come into being, how they are taught and legitimized, and which role social contact plays in this context. In addition, Pisoiu further analyzes the mechanisms through which these interpretative frameworks become exclusive and absolute, eventually contributing to individuals' engagement in violent activities.

A further model proposed by Wiktorowicz (2005) addresses the sources and the manipulative power of frames (lenses through which reality is perceived) as well as of those who create them. Here, the introduction of alternative norms and values arises in the context of the mobilizing rhetoric of movement entrepreneurs. Among the framing and resonance mechanisms found within framing theory, Wiktorowicz specifically emphasizes the resonance element that is embodied by the authority of the framework articulator with regard to processes of radicalization.

From the perspective of social movement research, social networks and the associated emotional connections, political identities and socialization into pre-radical views play a core role in one's decision to join radical groups or go underground, as well as with regard to socialization into political violence. During this phase, the sense of being at war is adopted in some movements – a perception that is reinforced by isolation, alternative sources of information and the influences of ideology. Solidarity among group members is particularly strengthened by the risk situation in which individuals perceive themselves to be, paired with a growing sense of responsibility vis-à-vis the other members. At the same time, strong affective connections are needed to facilitate the adoption of new values, a new reality and a new identity. The existence of underground groups, which are, by nature, *small and illegal*, relies on coherence among the group members. This demands total engagement, an exclusivity of ideas and social contacts and, ultimately, the loss of one's individual identity. Concurrently, the group offers a series of benefits that, as della Porta (1992) argues, are often sought by young people: adventure, action, utopianism, energy, autonomy, openness, experimentation and answers to their search for

identity and allegiance. The literature on social movements has inductively developed, interpersonal mechanisms that explain why individuals join radical groups and account for further cognitive and behavior-oriented radicalization; a number of socio-psychological can be identified and which are similar in content.

In their consideration of participation in ever-more radical activities, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko (2017, 209) investigated the *slippery slope* mechanism. Looking into the role of social networks, McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) focus on the affective bonds that they refer to as the *power of love*. One essential factor that they identify as to why such bonds are important for joining a group is the need to trust newcomers. In relation to the increasingly extreme nature of opinions, McCauley and Moskalenko (2008, 422) refer to the mechanism of 'group polarization', 'group extremity shift' or 'risky shift'. They argue that group opinions regarding risky behavior and politics tend to shift in line with the majority opinion held by members of the group. For example, if most members favor high risk taking, the opinion of the whole group will shift towards "increased extremeness" on this issue (ibid., 422).

5 Social identities

Another approach that looks at individuals within their social environment is the concept of 'social identity' that has been rather popular in recent years (see Abrams and Hogg 1999). It refers to social identities of individuals as being defined by groups and acting in relation to them. Identification with groups and the associated feeling of self-worth derived therefrom emerge in the context of processes of differentiation from other groups (outgroups). At the same time, differentiating oneself from the outgroup and positively assessing one's own group (ingroup) serves to boost positive feelings of distinctiveness, to favor one's own group and, ultimately, to self-valorize the group and its members (Walther 2014, 395).

According to the so-called *uncertainty* model (Hogg, Kruglanski, and van den Bos 2013), if an individual's resources are insufficient to overcome their sense of uncertainty, extremist beliefs can prove suitable for providing a clear, radical understanding of what is right, wrong, good and evil, while identity becomes consolidated by joining a value community that can provide orientation; moreover, (ostensible) authoritarian obedience can also restore a sense of security (Hogg 2014). Experiments have confirmed that stronger identifications with social groups and one's own national identity emerge under induced uncertainty (Grant and Hogg 2012). In addition, it has also been shown that, in cases of heightened uncertainty, identification with radical instead of moderate groups tends to rise (Hogg, Mehan, and Farquharson 2010). In a related approach, situations causing uncertainty were found to cause defensively extreme reactions (McGregor, Prentice, and Nash 2013).

Extremist groups and actors take advantage of these psychological mechanisms of ingroup-outgroup relations by conveying a dichotomous and heavily simplified worldview regarding what is right and wrong as well as good and evil using collective narratives (see Weis and Zick 2007). Such narratives clearly specify the alleged causes of individual and collective problems, which can potentially create pressure to act among the affected individuals (Berrissoun 2014, 390). Especially for young people who have not yet developed a definitive self-image and who find themselves in a stage of life marked by uncertainties, group dynamics can provide orientation through their clear structures and rules. Extremist groups not only provide their members with fulfillment in terms of individual desires for belonging, influence, understanding, self-worth and trust, they also offer subjectively plausible answers to individual problems by ascribing these to collective experiences of injustice (see Böckler and Zick 2015, 112). For example, Islamist milieus place the blame for their problems on the worldwide discriminatory treatment of Muslims. Sageman develops this approach further and deems social identity to be a central explanatory factor for radicalization (2016, 115–116). In this view, political violence can be traced back to an identification with a (supposedly) threatened group, whereby this perceived aggression serves to bolster its definitive formation.

Another distinct approach to social identity is the so-called devoted actor framework that integrates sacred values with identity fusion. Sacred values are "nonnegotiable preferences whose defense compels

actions beyond evident reason" while identity fusion refers to the merging of individual identity with the one of the collective. The framework posits that "sacred values and identity fusion interact to produce willingness to make costly sacrifices for a primary reference group even unto death, that is, sacrificing the totality of self-interests" (Atran 2016, n.p.).

6 Socialization

Another line of investigation has looked at individual socialization over time; here, again, the results have been mixed. Socialization refers to a process through which individuals adopt the norms, values, attitudes and, especially, roles provided by agents of socialization. In her study on violent offenders from the far-right extremist scene, Kleeberg-Niepage (2012, 19) does not identify any specific form of early socialization leading to right-wing extremism. In the Islamist context, Malthaner and Waldmann (2012) and Logvinov (2014) understand radicalization to also be a process of socialization set against the background of extremist systems of belief and norms that become consolidated, reproduced and handed down through social learning within discourse communities and radical milieus. In the course of this process, attitudes, perceptions, emotions and actions become increasingly polarized, deviate from the social consensus, and may ultimately lead to extremist criminal offenses. In the right-wing extremist milieu, competing youth scenes provide diverse offerings for leisure and socialization. Far-right extremist cliques encountered in one's immediate social environment can serve as possible spheres of entry and socialization for young people (Quent and Schulz 2015, 145). Far-right extremist attitudes become consolidated through mutual exchanges that take place between the individual, the family, the school, one's peers (of the same age) and media sources; here, far-right extremist organizations merely serve as subordinate entities for political socialization (Becker 2013, 6).

Working on the basis of biographical case reconstructions of far-right extremist girls and women, Köttig (2013, 2004) has identified multiple factors that mutually interact in the process of turning to a certain scene, in particular as they relate their families and life histories. All across the analyzed cases, Köttig (2004, 314) identified the mutual interplay that exists between family histories marked by National Socialism – with which the respective individuals had not come to terms or addressed –, unstable parent-child relationships and far-right extremist structures in the social environment.

Beyond seeing radicalization itself as a process of socialization, researchers have also attempted to identify gaps or problems within 'normal' socialization processes and have related these to radicalization. For instance, it has been argued that conversions to right-wing extremist and Islamist scenes among young people in particular can be understood as plausible and functional subjective attempts to overcome problematic life situations and the challenges associated with age (Glaser 2016). Some of the critical and conflictive life events or phases identified include: confrontations with one's peers (of the same age), illness or the loss of a parent or a partner, biographical ruptures such as time spent at youth centers or in prison, profound experiences of frustration in the development of one's personality, internal and external experiences of victimhood due to domestic violence, and personal careers of violence or criminality (see Srowig et al. 2017; Glaser 2016; Köttig 2004). Meloy and Yakely (2014, 351, 363) have found that phases of risk in early childhood and in one's teenage years can lead to bonding issues that may promote the development of a radical, terroristic mindset. According to Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber (2017, 172), psychoanalytical observations likewise point to the fact that emotional neglect early in life can result in severe crises during adolescence. In the case of contemporary research into far-right extremism, the hypothesis of impaired family socialization enjoys broad recognition (Miliopoulus 2017, 109). Based on biographical interviews with former members of far-right extremist groups, Simi, Sporer, and Bubolz (2016) have shown that over 80% had experienced at least one difficult situation during childhood related to physical or sexual abuse, emotional or physical neglect, the incarceration of a parent or other forms of absence on the part of the parents, while over half cited at least three such situations. Drug abuse was also considered to be a risk factor during early childhood, cited by nearly 60% of the individuals interviewed. Moreover, more than 70% exhibited be-

havioral problems related to alcohol or drug abuse during early adolescence, prior to the start of their political radicalization. Lützinger (2010, 31) reports that more than half of the extremists she studied reported of a violent domestic life and bodily abuse. With regard to experiences of assault or abuse in the family or the social environment, Köttig (2013) found that these are relived within the context of the far-right extremist environment – and particularly in intragroup romantic relationships. Birgit Rommelspacher (1995, 19; 1994, 39) argues that right-wing extremist women experience oppression and violence, a reason for which they project their anger and fear of violence perpetrated by men onto the outgroup. Sanders and Jentsch (2011, 145) also states that sexist attacks that extremist women experience are transferred to the bogeyman represented by a hyper-potent foreign male. Through this, the patriarchal hierarchy within the milieu is maintained without question and racially motivated vilifications of the enemy are propagated. We also find similar psychological dynamics related to experiences of contempt, constructions of the enemy and the re-patriarchalization of young women and men in Islamist contexts (Messerschmidt 2018, 32; Zick, Roth, and Srowig 2017, 71–72,76; Kilb 2015, 19; Mansour 2015; Sutterlüty 2003).

The adoption of extremist attitudes and belonging to a group of individuals with similar opinions can serve to satisfy individual needs and desires as well as overcome individual problems and unsatisfactory experiences with socialization in one's early childhood and teenage years. Zick (2017, 28) argues that extremist cells and groups can function as niches for socialization that help young people overcome developmental tasks. Based on an analysis of WhatsApp records of a radical Salafist youth group, Zick, Roth, and Srowig (2017, 91) concluded that the adoption of Islamist ideology constitutes a *normal* youth phase in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Extremist groups are effective at attracting young people by providing them with an alternative developmental niche, or by instilling hope in these vulnerable people that they can better promote their social motives and goals.

Leuzinger-Bohleber (2017, 180) emphasized that the transition towards IS combatant groups proceeds very rapidly, as is also the case within traditionalistic societies. Adolescents are subject to a process of integration that takes several years and is marked by bodily changes in their own self-image and the development of a masculine or feminine sexual identity through the conveyance of patriarchal gender relations. Koshrokhavar (2015) supports the hypothesis that gender concepts among young women within Islamism are rooted in hyper or re-patriarchalization. To that effect, there are commonalities in far-right extremism and Islamism regarding identity and gender-related motivations among young women and men, so that the majority of young women radicalize for the same reasons as their male counterparts. Following her investigation of various political forms of extremism, Lützinger (2010, 67) concludes that individual conflicts and problems, along with their dysfunctional solutions and coping strategies within the family, also lead to conflicts outside of the family, such as within the school context; these cause young people to remove themselves from the primary entities of socialization. One observation spanning across all ideologies is that, in order to deal with the challenges common to this phase of their lives, young people in this study joined extremist groupings of similarly aged individuals that offered them support, understanding and structure (Lützinger 2010, 71–73).

7 Conclusion and research recommendations

This article has taken stock of the German literature on individual radicalization and discussed findings within international literature – both selected using a systematic keyword search. While no specific extremist or terrorist profile could be identified, the literature does offer evidence of certain personality characteristics below the pathology threshold that appear across numerous biographies and deserve further investigation. The role of specific cognitions, motivations and emotions could also be outlined, as well as the fundamental role of social interaction and socialization processes. It remains evident, however, that more research is needed that seriously considers the fact that we are dealing with a process and with interdependencies involving individuals, groups and societies. Adequately investigating these interdependencies demands more and better qualitative and quantitative research designs with sufficiently large sample sizes

and improved longitudinal data that extends beyond the life courses of individuals.

Second, along the lines of the question as to why certain individuals do not radicalize, further studies should compare cases of radicalization and the lack thereof in selected extremist scenes and beyond. In our view, Gambetta and Hertog (2016) provide an excellent quantitative study on jihadist radicalization, including a comparison to other radicalization phenomena – one which can serve as a model for future analyses.

Future studies should seek to independently develop empirically oriented and interdisciplinary comparative radicalization research. Such research should investigate the various ideological expressions of extremism, along with the associated phenomena (populism, gangs and sects, etc.), as well as address the issue of individual developments in modern societies in the midst of transformation. As radicalization processes are highly individual and not singular in nature, they allow us to identify patterns of individual and social development paths (also see della Porta 2018). Our study has already indicated one of these patterns and contributed to a better understanding of the importance of personalities and of identity with regard to radicalization. However, empirical investigations into single factors of political or religious extremism that do not incorporate the corresponding comparison groups will be unable to explore the characteristics of individual radicalization processes in the future. Many of the research findings presented here are based on published studies that unfortunately have not been replicated or reanalyzed. There have been few attempts to reproduce or conduct secondary analyses of the data. Many of the empirically observed mechanisms and dynamics require multiple studies for the sake of gaining additional confidence with the contexts. We have already mentioned the need for comparative research on terrorist individuals or those motivated by extremism. Without drawing comparisons to radical individuals or groups that do not make resort to violence, researchers cannot account for the specificity of the respective forms of extremism, despite the fact that the psychology of radicalization does not always depend on specific ideologies – but this would first have to be proven. We recommend developing comparative radicalization research through cooperation and with an interdisciplinary approach.

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