

# KEY SOCIO- PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS IN PREVENTIVE AND SUPPRESSIVE INTERVENTIONS

In this document socio-psychological factors are described  
that need to be taken into account when intervening to  
prevent violent radicalisation or stimulate de-radicalisation

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## INTRODUCTION

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According to a group of researchers, there seems to be no single personality, typology, or specific process that leads to violent radicalisation (e.g., Bjørgo, 2011; Kruglanski, & Fishman, 2006; Linden, 2009; Möller & Schumacher, 2007; SAFIRE, 2013; Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010). Rather, radicalisation can be seen as a complex phenomenon; a combination of factors at different stages that lead people to become involved in extremist groups.

Several factors are expected to play a key role at early and late stages of radicalisation. Consequently, preventive interventions (focusing on individuals that have not yet joined an extremist group) or suppressive interventions (focusing on individuals who are already a member of an extremist group) should focus on different key factors.

The present document provides a short overview of these factors based on the existing literature as well as on data collected in the SAFIRE project. The SAFIRE data are from two studies. The first study evaluated a preventive intervention in the Netherlands that focused on 46 individuals with a migrant background who were considered vulnerable to radicalisation but were not radicalised (see the focus document *Does it Work? How to evaluate a programme preventing radicalisation*). The second study included interviews with 13 former right-wing extremists from the Netherlands and Germany. In this study, researchers asked participants about their time before, during, and after membership in right-wing extremist groups. Based on these interview factors could be derived that may play an important role either in preventive or suppressive interventions.

In this paper we focus on key socio-psychological factors. First, a short overview of the factors that could play a key role in preventive interventions is presented. Next, we focus factors that could be key in suppressive interventions. We will conclude with implications and recommendations for policy makers and social workers.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

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### KEY FACTORS FOR PREVENTIVE INTERVENTIONS

#### *The Role of Family, Peers and Community*

Based on previous research among former right-wing extremists and the findings of SAFIRE, it can be concluded that first contact with an extremist ideology often occurs very early: in adolescence, at about age 12 to 16 (Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010; Möller & Schumacher, 2007). Particularly important in this stage of life is the so-called 'process of socialisation'. This refers to a person learning and accepting the generally established ways of accepted behaviour in a particular group or society. Socialisation processes have been shown to play an important role in the radicalisation process. For example, in a study among 40 Skinheads between 14 and 27 in West- and East-Germany, Möller and Schumacher (2007) show that the family is a central socialisation factor that contributes to the radicalisation process.

That family, but also peers and the surrounding community can be an important source of influence in the engagement process is in line with the Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, 1947), which marks the social network of adolescents as an important source of criminal behaviour. In developing interventions, therefore, one should not only focus on the individual, but also on their family, friends, and the community as a whole (see also Weine, Horgan, Robertson, Loue, Mohamed, & Noor, 2009). For example, setting positive norms as early as childhood about, for example, engaging in friendship with members of other social groups can lead to more positive evaluations of that group (Feddes, Noack, & Rutland, 2009). Stimulating interaction between members of different groups (like Muslims and non-Muslims) in schools and neighbourhoods could, thereby, reduce susceptibility to radicalisation and discrimination of this specific out-group.

Identifying the community and family resources that could help prevent radicalisation may help in the designing of policies and intervention programmes. For example, parents could be supported in their parenting roles (which may be different in their country of descent compared to the host country), involvement in education, and mentoring. These factors could also be

the focus of support for youth vulnerable to other ideologies such as right-wing, or left-wing extremism.

Besides focusing on the family, the community could also be involved. People seen as legitimate role models, could serve as positive examples. Research in social psychology has shown that so-called 'exemplars' can set the norm for the formation of opinions about others and behaviour towards these others (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1996). These exemplars however do need to be representative and earn the respect of the adolescents.

In interviews with former right-wing extremists in the SAFIRE project it was observed that the need for a social group - and friendship in particular - is critical in regard to the radicalisation process. Indeed, finding 'soul mates' or groups is an important motivation for potential radical people as the group can provide its members with structure and meaning in an uncertain world (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

#### **Need for Friendship and High Self-esteem**

Several other functions of the group for its members can be distinguished. Van der Valk and Wagenaar (2010) and Möller and Schumacher (2007) pointed out that the group fulfils important needs in terms of being a source of friendship, collaboration, and social protection. According to Social Identity Theory, one important function of the group is that it can be a source of self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Self-esteem is considered to be an additional key factor in the radicalisation process. For example, Möller and Schumacher (2007) argue that extremist groups help boost self-esteem of group members and are therefore attractive.

In SAFIRE, it was found that self-esteem was generally low before joining an extremist group, high while being a member in an extremist group, and again low after leaving the group. Preventions should, therefore, offer alternatives (e.g., other social groups) to prevent people joining extremist groups.

#### **Personal Uncertainty**

Personal uncertainty may also be an important key variable that could lead individuals to radicalise and join an extremist group. By personal uncertainty we refer to a person's feelings, over a longer period of time, of doubt about themselves. In addition, the person has a view of themselves or a view of the world that is continuously changing (Van den Bos & Lind, 2009). Personal uncertainty is often related to a person's identity (the question "Who am I"), purposes in life, and uncertainty about one's future (for example, job insecurity, unable to finish an education). When people are in an uncertain state, or an uncertain period of their life, they are likely to be more susceptible to extreme ideas (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt,

2007). Also, extremist groups become more attractive as they provide clear norms about how to behave and straightforward answers to questions and worries.

#### **Perceived Threat by another Group**

Threat by other groups also plays an important role in the radicalisation process. This can be perceived as a threat of losing a job or a threat to one's culture or identity. Previous research has shown that perceptions of threat caused by another group are related to negative attitudes toward this group (see for a meta-analysis: Riek, Mania, & Gaertner 2006). Furthermore, Doosje and colleagues (Doosje, Van den Bos, Loseman, Feddes, & Mann, 2012; Doosje, Loseman, & Van den Bos, 2013) found that threat caused by another group was related to more feelings of being treated unjustly, both as an individual and as part of a group, and a lack of support from local and national authorities ("the government does nothing to help us"). This is illustrated by what the following extreme Islamic person living in the Netherlands argued (Buijs, Demant, & Hamdy, 2006, p. 65):

I am worried about the oppression of Muslims. I empathise with my brothers in faith. Islam is just like a body, the pain is felt in all parts of the body. That is why I feel the pain of Muslims.

#### **Lack of Support for and Trust in Authorities**

Another important factor in the process of radicalisation is that individuals do not trust the local and national authorities. Indeed, in studies among non-radical Muslim and non-Muslim adolescents in the Netherlands, Doosje and colleagues found that a lack of support for and trust in authorities was related to a positive attitude towards the use of violence to reach one's ideals (Doosje et al., 2012; Doosje et al., 2013). This is illustrated by a statement from Mohammed B. (the murderer of the Dutch moviemaker and Islam-critic Theo van Gogh) who argues that "you cannot expect anything from the government. I have had enough of the institutions" (Buijs et al., 2006, p. 35). Authorities do not only refer to the government. Authorities can also be teachers or police. Indeed, Möller and Schumacher (2007) and also Van der Valk and Wagenaar (2010) reported that long-lasting conflicts with teachers are often found among right-wing extremist youth.

#### **Feelings of Injustice and Identity-Related Issues**

In line with previous research, the studies in the SAFIRE project confirm that reducing feelings of injustice and working on identity-related issues is an important aspect of successful intervention programmes. Feelings of injustice have been shown by several radicalisation researchers to be an important motivator for people to radicalise (i.e., Doosje et al., 2012; Doosje et al., 2013; Moghaddam, 2005; see also King & Taylor, 2011 for a review). That identity-related issues are an important factor is illustrated by the following story in the New

York Times (January 31, 2010). It tells about Omar Hammami (see Figure 1), originally from the USA who turned up fighting in an Islamic insurgency guerrilla army in Eastern-Africa in 2009.

According to the article, Hammami was a son in an immigrant family in the USA originally from Somalia. In adolescence, his family explain, he did had difficulties of living as a Muslim amongst a majority of Christians. On visits to Damascus he was very much impressed and drawn to the Islamic culture. After the 9/11 attacks he increasingly identified with Muslims abroad: "I was finding it difficult to reconcile between having Americans attacking my brothers, at home and abroad, while I was supposed to remain completely neutral, without getting involved." (New York Times, January 31, 2010).

Based on the SAFIRE findings, early interventions in adolescence focusing on the feelings of injustice and difficulties in dealing with two identities most likely could have stopped or reversed the radicalisation process of young adults in this situation. Furthermore, involving both parents, teachers, and peers may be a promising approach (see also Weine et al., 2009).



Figure 1. *The Jihadist next door: Omar Hammami as a freshman in high school. Right, in a Shabab propaganda video released in March 2009. Source: The New York Times, 2010/01/31*

### Social Disconnectedness & the Bridge Burning Phenomenon

Another important factor in the radicalisation process is the connectedness of an individual to the general society. By this we mean the extent to which an individual is integrated in society as a whole. For example by means of work or school, but also via organisations like sport clubs. Möller and Schumacher (2007) say that the right-wing extremists they interviewed often had difficulties at school (bad school performance, conflicts with teachers, being excluded by peers). In addition, they noted that participants were rarely involved in any institutional organisations like sport clubs or churches. Regarding the connection with society, it is often mentioned that compared to the period before becoming a member in an extremist group, during membership people distance themselves from individuals and organisations that are not part of the right-wing extremist group (Bjørge & Carlsson, 2005). This distancing from society, family, and

friends is one of the key factors, also termed 'Bridge Burning'. As we will see in the next section, this factor also plays an important role in preventing individuals from leaving the extremist group.

## KEY FACTORS FOR SUPPRESSIVE INTERVENTIONS

### Social Support

"There is no out. He's in too deep" (New York Times, January 31, 2010). These are the words of Omar Hammami's sister, mentioned above. This is the situation of a person who has been radicalised to such an extent that he or she is fully integrated in an extremist group. This group provides the person with the needs mentioned earlier: protection, social support, friendship, a purpose in life, self-esteem. However, there is an increasingly large body of work that focuses on factors that can motivate people to leave extremist groups (e.g., Bjørge, 2011; Demant, Wagenaar, & Van Donselaar, 2009; Möller & Schumacher, 2007; Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010).

Van der Valk & Wagenaar (2010) conclude from their interview study in the Netherlands that there are three phases involved in the disengagement process:

- A phase of doubt about one's own involvement in the extremist scene or group. This phase may concern ideology, but also poor functioning of the group or bad behaviour by group members.
- In the second phase, decisions are made. In this phase one decides either to leave the organisation, to distance oneself from the ideology, or both.
- Third, there is the phase of normalisation, in this phase one tries to re-connect to society. In addition, the individual engages in a process of dealing with past experiences.

Importantly, it is exactly the functions that the group fulfils that prevent a person from leaving a group. This is illustrated by the following statement of a former right-wing extremist who participated in the SAFIRE study:

*So besides my group of friends [who were all in the right-wing movement] I had another friend whom I really could count on. An anchor to me [...]. Because if I had said: "I quit, I will completely leave the group", then at least I had him to have some contact with. Social isolation is a big problem. Everything, your whole social life, is about the friends you have in that group. It does not matter if it is a movement or ideology, it is about that group.*

After leaving the group one falls in a "black hole", as one participant put it. Often people lose contact with friends and family and need to build up their social life again. The outlook on losing the protection of the extremist

group and existing friendships can be an important reason to stay.

### Self-esteem

The analyses of the SAFIRE interview data confirm that after people leave an extremist group, their self-esteem drops. In line with the previous section, one important function of the group is to provide members with a purpose, and thereby self-worth. As said before, in our work we found that self-esteem was often low before entering the group, high during membership, and low again after leaving. Leaving a group is therefore not an attractive option. Therefore, when leaving the group people should receive social support to prevent this drop in self-esteem.

### Bad Group Functioning and Disappointment

The SAFIRE findings show that it is a challenge to suppressive interventions that it is hard to directly convince individuals to leave the group. Bad group functioning, disappointment in its members, or realising that group goals are not realistic seem key factors to focus upon in designing suppressive interventions.

## CONCLUSIONS

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In line with previous research on engagement in extremist groups, the present study shows that both socialisation factors and psychological factors play a key role in the phase directly before and at the time of becoming engaged in an extremist group. The most important socialisation factor seems to be the peer group. As the majority of individuals become engaged in a group at a very young age (often during adolescence, age 12-16) preventive interventions should, therefore, focus on adolescents. The social context of adolescents should hereby be taken into account.

Social work can play a key role in preventive interventions. These interventions should focus not only on the individual, but also on the parents, peers, and community. For example, support could be offered to immigrant families in raising their children who often have to deal with two identities: their ethnic heritage and their position in the host society. Interventions that lead to an increase in self-esteem, greater connectedness to general society and that provide people with a sense of agency seem to be effective. In addition, an intervention should teach individuals to deal with possible negative emotions like frustration, injustice and relative deprivation, but also with feelings of threat.

It should be noted that many first-line interventions and social work programmes already focus on many key factors in the radicalisation process. However, these

programmes often do not address identity-related issues of immigrant youth. For example, programmes could focus in particular on how to deal with (perceived) discrimination. Also, adolescents could be taught how to cope with negative images in (social) media such as insults to their social group. The majority of participants in the SAFIRE research also mentioned the school as an important context for prevention. It was stressed that preventive programmes in this context should be implemented by experienced teachers and/or by role models, like former extremists.

In regard to suppressive interventions, these should focus on the functioning of social groups. Bad group functioning or disappointment in group members was found to be the main reason for leaving the group. Front-line workers can play an important role here. It is important to have contact persons who are accessible for individuals who are thinking of leaving the group. A clear finding of SAFIRE is that for most participants the decision to leave the group came forth out of bad functioning of the extremist group or bad behaviour of its members. When leaving a group, people seem to fall into a void after its social network falls away. In designing interventions, this void should be filled up. Thus, supporting people in meeting this challenge is important.

Importantly, participants themselves often mention a third person, such as an important family member or friend from the past. A lack of this support could undermine a person's motivation to leave the group. Interventions aimed at getting people to disengage from the extremist group should take this factor into account as well.

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