

Why Young People Engage in Radical Behavior and Sympathize With Terrorism: Injustice, Uncertainty, and Threatened Groups

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Summary

In this report we study why young people engage in radical behavior and start sympathizing with terrorist movements. More specially, we examine the beliefs of Dutch youngsters (13-21 years) about muslim radicalism and rightwing extremism.

Following earlier studies on this topic, important demographic variables are identified that could lead to muslim radicalism and rightwing extremism. These variables include education, gender, age, religiosity, and ethnic and cultural factors. We further note that it is impossible to give an "objective" demographic description of radicalization among young people. That is, factors that lead to radical behavior are complex and multi-faceted, and it is not possible to point out demographic variables that directly and straightforwardly impact on the radicalization process. Thus, when certain demographic conditions are met this does not imply that young people in fact will engage in radical behavior.

Therefore, this reports states that in order to obtain good insights into why people engage in radical behavior and start sympathizing for terrorist violence, careful attention should be paid to how young people perceive the situation they are in. After all, how people think, behave, and feel is affected to a large extent by how they interpret situations. This report, therefore, pays appropriate attention to important aspects of how young people perceive the modern society. To this end, we build on modern insights from the behavioral sciences in general, and social psychology in particular.

Social psychology is the scientific discipline that studies what people think, do, and feel, and what the influence of other people is on these reactions. In particular, we present a conceptual model that proposes that experienced *injustice* plays a crucial role in the psychological process that leads to radical behavior. For example, when a young person experiences that his/her own group is deprived compared to other groups, or when the person feels unfairly treated by important actors in the person's society, then this can lead the person to start engaging in radical worldviews or extremist behaviors. Our model suggests that injustice thus leads young people to hold more positive beliefs about radical belief systems, judge Dutch authorities as illegitimate, start to contrast their own group from other groups, feel superior to others, and are less committed to the Dutch society.

When people experience injustice this can easily lead to anger against society, as a result of which intentions to and actually engaging in violent and rude behavior can occur. This effect is particularly likely when people are predisposed to react in strong ways to experiences of personal *uncertainty* and when they experience that their own group is *threatened by other groups*. Thus, our model suggests that injustice, uncertainty, and threatened groups play a pivotal role in the process that may lead to radical (and perhaps even terrorist) behaviors

among young persons. We describe our model in Chapter 2 of this report. A visual depiction of the model is given in Figure 2.1 on p. 9.

We tested our conceptual model in an internet survey with 1341 Dutch persons who were between 13 and 21 years old. Chapter 3 describes this study and Section 3.1 presents the design of the study, the way in which our respondents were sampled, and how we analyzed our data (pp. 24-28). We note explicitly that the current sample was not a genuinely randomly drawn sample, so caution is needed when interpreting the results. This noted, the sampling did not affect tests of the relationships between the variables identified by our model. Therefore, we focus on testing our model and Section 3.7 (pp. 61-67) summarizes the results obtained.

The second study that this report describes consisted of in-depth interviews with 24 radical young persons. Chapter 4 describes this study and results are summarized in Section 4.3 (pp. 94-96). General conclusions following the model and the two studies presented are drawn in Chapter 5 (pp. 97-101).

The research findings of our two studies show that when basic aspects of a young person's life are perceived as unjust this is likely to result in muslim radicalism and rightwing extremism. Together with sensitivity for personal uncertainty and group threats this can easily lead to externally oriented negative emotions (such as anger) and intentions to engage in radical and even violent behavior.

More generally, we suggest that careful attention to how situations are perceived and interpreted by young people can contribute to the understanding of radical behavior. Politicians and policy makers can use this insight, and the specifics described in our report, to better understand and predict the behaviors of young people in the Netherlands (and elsewhere). Using these insights can lead to a better grounding of the prevention of radical and violent behaviors in one's society.

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