

European Platform of Deradicalisation (EDNA):

Guidelines and questions/ interaction strategies for the interviews with parents of sons and daughters that turned extremist and/or engage in hate cultures

by Harald Weilnböck



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As has been outlined in “How to gain deradicalising narratives”, an impactful “deradicalising testimonials” consists roughly of two base levels of impact components: (A) narrative sequences from the interviewee which generate trust and credibility in the listener/ viewer. i.e. render the witness credible – even in highly resistant and distrustful listeners/ viewers (bordering paranoid frames of perception) as radicalised individuals tend to be – and (B) narrative sequences that, by their content, have a deradicalising impact potential (either emerging in the main narrative of the interviewee or triggered by internal and external questions). However, in order to produce sustainable effects of distancing and deradicalisation, these sequences need to be able to not only create what is generally called ‘cognitive dissonance’. Much rather they need to be able to facilitate an individual experience of emotional opening and personal self-awareness – which can only be achieved in the context of an intensive coaching relationship (with an individual practitioner and/or a facilitated group).

The narrative of the parent will be all the more impactful the more it does not focus too much or too early on the radicalized son or daughter but views the parent in her or his own life story extensively before turning toward questions around the radicalized sons/daughters.

It was found throughout all EDNA interviews (with all client groups) that following the basic techniques of a narrative-biographical or narrative-issue-focused interview is the key guideline for EDNA- interviews. Additional templates of questioning strategies are useful only in a limited way since they tend to confuse the open-process dynamic of the interview.

With regard to the initial question that is used in parent interviews, the following phrasing seems adequate:

“We would like to work with and find ways to be helpful for parents of children that came to engage in lifestyles of polarisation, group-oriented hostility, hate crime, or violent extremism. We have realized that it is conducive to begin with having an exchange about the life history of you as a parent and your family history in terms of your parents – the grandparents of you daughter/son. Hence, we would like to ask you to tell us your life story and your family history – up to the time when your daughter/ son was Born.

You may proceed with this as you want; you may want to begin as early as possible, long before your current situation came into play; and you may tell anything that occurs to you and you feel okay about relating to us.

You have as much time as you like to tell it. We won't ask you any questions for now. We will just make some notes on the things that we would like to ask you more about later, if we haven't got enough time today, perhaps in a second interview.”

Further question which are also suitable in order to follow the double objective to (a) facilitate a kind of exchange between interviewer and parent that the parent experiences as helpful, enriching and possibly even therapeutic (in the sense of counselling experience) and (b) produces audio material that may be helpful in interventions with young people at-risk of or already entangled in hateful and extremist identity concepts and behaviours.

This would also include issues/ questions about whether extremism/fundamentalism had been part of the parent’s life history and/or of the family history in any way. More precisely the question would be whether group-focussed hatred, resentment, prejudice and violence played a role in the parent’s life-history and in her/his family history. A related question would then also be: Which of these issues/ incident has or has not been communicated to the daughter/son? I what way was it communicated?

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External questions to the parent with regard to their son's/daughter's radicalizations and *deradicalisation*:

The external questions need to be as narrative and open-process as were the internal questions, i.e. they are placed in a flexible and contextualized manner. They are employed in this way mostly in case that the topic/ question did not yet come up independently in the open-process narrative (biographical) interview so far – or they are asked in reference to what the person has already express on this topic/ question.

Under these considerations, external questions in interviews with parents can then be phrased according to the following lines of topics/issues.

- How did the life-history of your son/ daughter evolved as seen through your eyes (with follow-up narrative questions regarding the parent's actual account and its single sequences)?
- Within this life-history, how did extremism come about? (as always, further narrative in-depth follow-up questions on any details that the interviewee relates)
- Can you tell the moment when you first noticed violent extremism with your child? What kinds of thoughts/ memories, reactions and feelings did this bring up in you at the time – and which come up now in the interview? (further narrative in-depth follow-up questions)
- Can you remember and tell about other moments in which you were encountering the issue with her/him and had to deal with this directly in interacting with her/him? – thoughts/ memories, reactions, strategies and feelings then and now in the interview.
- Can you remember and tell about moments you felt angry or shocked by this occurrence? Can you elaborate on this and similar situations, thoughts, and observations?

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- Can you remember and tell about moments in which you felt proud of your son/ daughter in spite of this development – in the context of extremism related situations or in other unrelated situations?
- Can you remember and tell about moments in which you felt you understood what was going on with your child in terms of radicalisation? Can you elaborate on this and similar situations, thoughts, and observations?
- What thoughts did/ do you have about the reasons and motivations of your son/ daughter to turn towards violent extremism?
- Can you remember and tell about moments where you respected his/her extremist engagement for some particular reasons ... in which you felt you, personally, learned something important from her/him?
- Can you tell us about moments in which you felt sorry for any of your son/ daughter with regard to any aspect of their life-history so far?
- Can you tell us about moments/ situations in which you felt that your son/ daughter began to distance him-/herself or moved away from violent extremism? Can you elaborate on such situations and observations?
- If this was the case, what thoughts did/ do you have about the reasons and motivations of your son/ daughter to turn away from violent extremism?