

European Platform of Deradicalisation (EDNA):

As to solutions: Some guidelines of good-practice in creating deradicalization narratives for the internet and social media

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Notwithstanding all misunderstandings and fallacies depicted above as characterizing many of the current activities in internet and social media interventions, the experiences and findings from the EDNA project have lead up to some tentative guidelines for media tool based deradicalisation interventions.

(1) First, any initiative of producing and employing mediated deradicalizing narratives should in every step of the procedure work at maximally acknowledging the established principles and guidelines of good-practice (offline) derad and prevent interventions – i.e. be “narrative” (versus argumentative and debating), “relational” (versus instructional/ content and teaching focused), “supporting emotional intelligence” (versus cognitive), “open-process” and “participative” (versus syllabus based), “trusting, confidential, and committed” (versus hierarchical/ leadership focused) etc. Evidently, for media projects this implies the challenge to find ways of doing what at first sight might seem utterly impossible. How, for example, could a media project realize any degree of “trust, confidentiality, and commitment”, “open process” procedures and “relational” dynamics, while the internet and social media hold only little possibility for confidentiality and personally identified commitment and while media production tends to be closed-shop, content based and focused on the product rather than on process – envisaging mono-directional content - viewer correspondences? And yet, some quite promising possibilities might be within reach that would allow for creating deradicalizing narratives in ways that maximally observe the established principles of good-practice derad and prevent interventions.

(2) Hence, in order to achieve this some formal precaution is required: A mechanism of ‘Practitioner Mainstreaming’ should be put in place as routine procedure in any media initiative. In fact, ‘Practitioner Mainstreaming’ needs to be implemented in just any project, initiative or policy making procedure that bears on practitioners’ work in the field of deradicalisation and prevention. For, even more so than in other fields of intense relational intervention work, it is the first-line practitioners who have the most profound knowledge about and experience with the subject and all methodological and contextual issues around it. On the other hand, if one poses the question on conferences, in forums, and in

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committees that deal with this subject matter, who in the room (and/or on the podium) is actually a practitioner or has some degree of experience as first-line facilitator of deradicalisation interventions, one finds that the proportion of practitioners is minimal – if not totally absent. Plus, practitioners sometimes tend to not be very vocal or feel they are not articulated enough to live up to the discourse standards of academic and policy making levels.

The relative absence of first-line practitioners – physically and/or discourse-dynamically – in key groups, committees and forums on the subject matter is one of the most peculiar and detrimental structural impediments that bears on all levels of endeavor in the field of deradicalisation and prevention. As a consequence some degree of alienation has emerged between first-line practitioners and the other stakeholders of prevention and deradicalisation issues – leading some practitioners to feel that these various stakeholders “just don’t know the first thing about how deradicalization works (!)”. Moreover, situations do, in fact, occur quite frequently in which academic, media and policy level stakeholders make assumptions and statements about issues of de-/radicalization which are not only controversial but must seem utterly nonsensical before the backdrop of practitioner experiences. For sure, this causes risks not only for the work fields of prevention and deradicalisation as such but has a negative influence on societal resilience as well as on the security forces’ awareness and reaction capacity. Since both societal resilience and the security forces capacity rely on a minimal knowledge about basic facts and factors of de-/radicalization.

The most prominent case in point in Germany is the fact that nobody and no societal fraction would have deemed it at all likely or even possible that a neo-Nazi death squad could be around killing perceived foreigners, not even centre leftwing intellectuals and media. It was only some first-line deradicalisation practitioners, field experts, and a handful investigative journalists that were not totally taken by surprise when the NSU neo-Nazi death squad was incidentally uncovered after having committed systematic murders, bomb attacks, and bank robberies for a time period of ten years while the murders were publically termed Kebab Killings by press and politicians suggesting that it is migrant mafia milieus that are responsible for the killings.

Hence, a more intense exchange relationship between the two fractions – first-line practitioners and other stakeholders – is to be recommended in order to assure the overall quality of the work done in the sector of prevention and deradicalisation activities. More specifically, it is recommended for any (media) activity in this area to establish a general procedure of ‘Practitioner Mainstreaming’. Just like with gender mainstreaming, this

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practitioner mainstreaming would secure that each and every context which deals with issues of extremism, hate crime and prevention/ intervention, makes sure that a sufficient number of first-line practitioners are present and are proactively asked to share their experiences, assessments and recommendations. Hence journalists, academicians, policy makers, and other committees' whenever they convene, discuss and decide on extremism issues would always be encouraged to systematically interact with and call upon these practitioners in order to have their assumptions be confronted with the field practitioners actually work experiences.

(3) More narrowly applying to the issue of internet and social media, another recommendation to be given in general is, that any input of audio-visual material into face-to-face interventions and contexts of deradicalisation should always be systematically embedded in a well-structured off-line setting of direct face-to-face (preferably group based) intervention work. For, one thing has been reconfirmed by each and every practitioner interviewed in and beyond RAN activities: The rash reaction on the part of many first-line practitioners that “one cannot deradicalize on-line, period!” is true in the sense that one cannot deradicalise or, in fact induce any form of lasting personal change, only by means of media tools and by delivering media content to clients. Yet, many media interventions seem to silently imply just that – mostly because they are more attached to prevent agendas without, however, being sufficiently aware of the differences and communalities between deradicalisation and prevention. They thus seem to follow the unspoken assumption that the media product as such will do the job. This erroneous assumption may be a consequence of the current belief that internet and social media are as powerful a force that they are able to singlehandedly radicalize a person, which subsequently is then conceived of as a ‘self-radicalized person’, ‘lone actor’ or ‘lone wolf’. However, even this relatively more plausible hypothesis has been effectively disproven by two recent studies on the issue.¹ All the more questionable is the supposition that media input can deradicalize per se.

However, the implicit – and erroneous – supposition that a media tool or product could by itself have a deradicalising effect ignores the very nature of deradicalisation; and it ignores

¹ (1) Ines Von Behr, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards, Luke Gribbon (2013). Radicalisation in the digital era. The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism. By the RAND Corporation Europe. <http://www.rand.org/randeurope/research/projects/internet-and-radicalisation.html>.

(2) Diana Rieger, Lena Frischlich, Gary Bente (2013). Propaganda 2.0 – Psychological Effects of Right-Wing and Islamic Extremist Internet Videos”. German Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA-Publikationsreihe “Polizei + Forschung”). Luchterhand Publishing. http://www.bka.de/nn_233148/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/Presse2013/130819__BKA-StudieZurWirkungExtremistischerInternet-Propaganda.html.

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the complexity and sensitivity that processes of deradicalisation have. In fact, looking upon this more closely, the processes of personal development which are and need to be triggered by an impactful deradicalisation intervention (and even by secondary prevention) are as intense and powerful as processes of in-depth psychotherapy. Just as psychotherapy cannot be done through a media product, a personal process of deradicalisation will always be entirely reliant on the face-to-face relational work which is facilitated by a personally engaged practitioner.

Given the activities that are presently put out by academia and ethically inspired parts of the media industry in order to develop media based tools and approaches, in terms of deradicalisation the suggestion seems reasonable, as a rule of thumb, to follow a 80-20 ratio for the online-offline interface of activities around internet and social media. This means acknowledging a general methodological guideline, according to which one expects to spend roughly 80% of attention and resources on issues that regard the off-line embedding of any media product / tool – and only 20% on the content and form of the media product itself. The assumption of a 80-20 ratio is based on first-line practitioners' experiences and practice research – and it is designed to preventively counteract a particular risk that is attached to collaborating with project partners/ staff that work in or are affiliated with the media and internet industry. For the natural tendency of these colleagues would always be to focus on the products and their content, structure, form and style rather than carefully devise the offline and off-medium embedding of the product. However, from practice research point of view this seems to be the most important aspect of any media based intervention in deradicalisation or prevention of violent extremism. Because, the online/ medium input must be both systematically prepared beforehand and elaborated in depth afterwards. This work has to be both intense and elaborate enough to enable the viewers to develop, personalize, acknowledge, and reflect upon their subjective reactions to any aspect of the product or testimonials, and to express them within the group process of the intervention.

(4) The observations above suggest that one takes a fundamentally different approach towards conceptualizing, communicating, and implementing a project on 'deradicalizing narratives for the internet'. The project would need to not any longer be a 'media and internet project' in the first place. It would not any longer foreground that its main objective is to collect interview material and create from it a 'tool of on-line intervention'. Rather the project would conceive of itself as offering a plain – off-line – intervention specifically targeted to different stakeholder groups of this issue. In other words, the intervention would be designed – and present itself – as face-to-face intervention of counseling, rehabilitation, therapy, or reintegration that provides assistance in preventing and personally working-

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through the effects of violent extremism and group focused hatred. This offer would be addressed to young at-risk people, perpetrators in the process of rehabilitation, formers of extremisms, also – with certain precaution – to victims/survivors of hate crime, and to other constituencies that might be demanding assistance, e.g. the parents/ families of radicalized young people, affected communities, and first-line practitioners of deradicalization and counseling work.

The only specificity that this counseling intervention would have is that it at the same time – and as an aside – offers the opportunity to generate narrative self-documents/ testimonials and provides training in basic skills of narrative interviewing, video/audio editing and post-production, thus training base media competencies. Moreover, the intervention would invite the participants to actively collaborate with the production of the media content and thus help to create a tool for use in offline deradicalization interventions with other clients – with one’s own testimonial being a key component of that tool. Ideally, the awareness that the testimonial might be used for beneficial purposes of prevention will support the therapeutic process. In systemic respect it may also strengthen resilience in the person’s environment and community. As one important aspect of this production process the participants would deal, among other things, with the question of how to sufficiently anonymize and masque the interviewee narratives to secure personal privacy and security while not losing any of the testimonial’s impact potential.

Hence, approaches like EDNA will eventually produce not only interview materials and media content/ “deradicalizing narratives” and provide them through audiovisual media and the internet – if at all it does the latter and not rather make them exclusively accessible to specialist practitioners. Rather, EDNA will first and foremost develop the blue-print of an innovative and highly participative intervention approach for various client groups around issues of extremism and hate crime that show demand of prevention or rehabilitation. Interestingly, while EDNA as a media project had in the beginning set out to produce means of online deradicalation, it then turned into, or in a sense turned back towards being more of an off-line deradicalization intervention – that still also incorporates, as an aside, content production and some practical training in interviewing and media editing.

(5) Finally, especially from the last two points it follows: Deradicalising narratives / testimonials should not be designed for multiple purposes but only for the one purpose of being used in deradicalization and hate-crime prevent interventions. Not even agendas of public awareness raising should be allowed to have influence on concept and production. Most certainly, however, the testimonials should not be used for purposes of economic gain and media sensationalism, or misappropriated for use by political actors for their own ends,

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such as to stoke populist emotions and gain votes in the next election. At the same time it would be unwise to use such testimonials to drive home ethical lessons within mainstream society, such as that a person should adhere to certain values, uphold established taboos, and pass moral judgments on others. Finally, the testimonials should not cater to the special interests of different interviewee groups (e.g. victims'-rights lobbies).

(6) With regard to the interview method and questioning strategies, the general mode of the interaction is of a (co-)narrative and open process nature and follows largely the techniques of biographical-narrative interviewing as practiced in social and biography research. This interview technique can be acquired as a skill in relatively short term workshops. However, media initiatives like EDNA do not have the objective to produce in-depth reconstructive research. Rather the task here is to deliver a therapeutic/ social work intervention which at the same time creates deradicalising narratives. Hence media footage is produced that may be expected to have a pacifying, relationship building, and pro-social – thus deradicalising – effect when delivered to young vulnerable people via facilitated interventions. This requires making certain methodological modifications to the interview procedure.

(a) Firstly, the interview process on the whole needed to be considerate of the fact that in order for the footage to have any such positive effects, it needs to be able to create personal interest and attention – and also a sense of trust and credibility – with a kind of young radicalized and/or vulnerable person which is a typically quite distrustful, defensive, hard to reach and difficult to raise interest with for any outside input – and which might also not have a great attention span in general. Therefore the interviewer will be significantly less self-restrained than s/he would be in a classical narrative interview, since this restraint – neutrality, passivity etc. – tends to induce doubt and apprehension on the part of the listener rather than feelings of credibility, legitimacy and authenticity. For instance, the interviewer will, in the course of questioning, refer back to other parts of the interview and rephrase key narratives of the interviewee; s/he will even put in little personal comments, deliberations, brief references to her/his own experiences, and ask detail questions (as a narrative interviewer would normally not do). The interviewer will do so in particular in the second and third follow-up interviews which bank on key sequences of the first interview and allows for more deepening of the issues expressed there.

For sure, the interviewer will be active and participative without disrupting the narrative flow of the interviewee. S/he would engage in this extra activity only to the extent that it fulfills the main purpose: to communicate to its prospective listeners – i.e. the young vulnerable or radicalized and distrustful clients of an intervention – that there is a trusting

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and honest relationship between interviewer and interviewee which is inspired by personal interest, curiosity, authenticity, and a drive for self-expression and (self-) reflexivity. As a consequence, the prospective listeners themselves may be powerfully supported in becoming trusting, curious, authentic and (self-) reflexive both in their listening to certain sequences of interview footage and in the face-to-face interaction with the other clients and the facilitators of the intervention in which the footage has been placed as a tool.

This methodological recommendation is also considerate of the fact that not only the interviewee needs to be able to communicate credibility and induce trust and curiosity via her/his media narratives and persona. The interviewer, too, needs to do what s/he can to signal credibility, a good-natured intention, trustworthiness as a person and responsible handling of the process of interviewing that s/he has devised and initiated with the client. In other, more concrete words both the interviewee and the interviewer help to manage the always present risk that their co-narrative exchange may be perceived as not trustworthy, manipulative and as intending some a sort of brainwashing (manipulative both vis-à-vis the interviewee and the audience of the media footage).

One additional measure which an initiative like EDNA can take in order to support a sense of credibility and trustworthiness is to include footage in which the interviewer her/himself – and other key people who devised and created the initiative as such – have been interviewed about issues of personal life-history, motivations of the project and prior experiences in the work field. The data base of the project's narrative sequences would then also contain narratives from the project's creators and stakeholders in order to further support trust, curiosity, self-expression and (self-) reflexivity in the – young and apprehensive – listeners.

(b) Secondly, in reference to anticipated limits of the clients' attention span, any such media project needs to be aware that a standard narrative interview – which is generally quite lengthy and can be thematically wandering – would probably not be able to catch and hold the continuous attention of this target group of listeners. Nor would an interview in its totality be very manageable for practitioners delivering the intervention.

Therefore it needs to be secured that, later on in postproduction, one will be able to extract sequences from the interview which are useful as pieces of media content when applied in other interventions (and only require a minimum of contextual reference to the extended version of the interview). Hence, any such sequence of audio footage needs to have a manageable size and be as much to the point as possible in order to support a good level of impact. This also means that already the interviewing needs to work on generating

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sequences that are as rich in narrative content and interviewee's personal investment as possible. To this effect a procedure of enriching and deepening key sequence has been developed by EDNA. This enriching procedure uses the option to have a second or third interview which revisits and more closely focuses on specifically targeted key issues/ sequences from the first interview and in so doing further deepens, enriches and intensifies the narrative content of these sequences.

In light of the question which issues and themes these key sequence should possibly focus on in order to create maximum deradicalising impact with the listeners, the EDNA project has found that there are – with each kind of interviewee (parents, practitioners, ex-offenders etc.) – some specific lines of narrative questioning (yet no regime of set questions!) that generally prove particularly helpful. (Once again, such issues and themes would not be pursued in the same way in a standard narrative research interview which proceeds in a more open process manner – but does, too, allow for narrowing in on certain sequences via so called external narrative questions.)

To give but some examples of such key issues/ themes – which need to be further developed through experimental project work in order to finally procure a more solid and comprehensive corpus of questioning strategies and targeted issues/ themes that are helpful in generating deradicalising narratives:

In interviewing practitioners of deradicalisation interventions and similar social work, it seems recommendable to not use methods of expert interviewing which focuses on theoretic knowledge about intervention techniques. Since this sort of statement is not what would support any listener's process of deradicalisation very much. In contrast, narrations about the practitioners' life history, professional biography and work experiences will be more likely to exert impact on its listeners. In fact, anything that portrays the more personal side of the practitioner's work and persona – and which cannot and ought not be communicated in the actual intervention due to reasons of professional distance and client focus – may be of help in generating deradicalising narratives from practitioner interviews

Narratives about the personal side of a practitioner's work and persona may comprise accounts about how s/he came to choose this kind of work, what particular path s/he took into it, what personal motivations lead her/him and what biographical experiences played a role, also about the specific inspiration to continue the engagement for an extended time and up to now. Furthermore, the interview questions may encourage tales about the possible gratification gained and/or doubts suffered in the course of case work and about how difficult, challenging, fascinating, enlivening etc. the work is technically and emotionally.

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They may invite stories about how some clients impressed, shocked, or confused the practitioner, how s/he came to better understand them and even respect them in spite of the hatred and violence they have engaged in. The practitioners may also possibly express confidence in the dignity and developmental potential of any human being – and perpetrator – and/or give other value statements which are then also backed by personal life history issues during the course of interviewing. In all that the practitioners can always be asked to specifically refer to individual clients that they have seen in their work and that stuck to mind for various factual or personal reasons. This will produce further narrative material that is able to immediately related to the targeted audience of vulnerable young people in prevent and deradicalisation.

In particular, practitioners may be asked to give personal accounts about whether and in which ways they themselves as younger persons had engaged in attitudes and activities that may be perceived as comparable or analogous to what the clients have thought and committed. This would be especially relevant in interviews with those practitioners that are not former extremists but come from a social work or security backgrounds. Since the so-called formers would, in any event, be asked to elaborately speak about their experiences of getting radicalised and of liberating themselves again from violent extremism later on. This line of co-narrative questioning may go as far as exploring what even today may make the practitioner vulnerable to expressing/ enacting resentment and exclusion that are normally expressed by people from violent extremism and hate cultures. In sharing these kinds of observations and narratives, the interview would effectively bridge the gap between extremism and mainstream through exploring various sorts of personal vulnerabilities – and thus, via personal narratives, build bridges for young people that presently find themselves in areas of extremism. These explorations would at the same time make sure to stress accounts about the protective factors that came in and helped the person to eventually avert the dangers of violent radicalisation.

Narrative explorations of this kind have proven to be quite capable of attracting the attention and curiosity of the listener and support processes of reconsideration and deradicalisation with her/him personally. Moreover, these narratives may support resilience building of a more sustainable sort than could possibly be achieved by the information and opinion campaigns as they are usually levelled in broadly conceptualized initiatives of civic education and consciousness raising.

Interviews with parents of sons and daughters who have turned extremist follow quite similar questioning strategies and, just like with the practitioners, produce accounts that the young people of the target group do normally not hear. For while practitioners usually cannot or do not want to relate much about themselves in the course of the intervention they deliver, the parents too, for various reasons, may not manage to communicate much in an narrative fashion, or even at all, about themselves, their history and their personal perspectives on things to their daughters and sons.

Lines of questions that more specifically pertain to parents interviews may for instance ask about the time before the daughter/son was born. Narratives may be encouraged about whether and how extremism/fundamentalism has been part of the parents' life history and/or of the family history, or more broadly speaking, whether and how group-focussed hatred, resentment, prejudice and violence played a role in the parent's life and family history. Furthermore it could be explored which of this has or has not been communicated to the daughter/son and how it came that this part of the parent's (family) history has or has not been communicated to the child in narrative parent-child interaction.

Departing from this family history perspective the interview may then explore how the parent conceives of and recounts the life-story of the child from birth to present, how and when s/he thinks extremism came about. Furthermore, the parent may be asked to tell about the moments when s/he first noticed the child's violent extremism and susceptibility to engage in hate speech/crime. The narrative interview would then go into what kinds of thoughts/ memories, reactions and feelings this realizations brought up with her/him as a parent at the time – and which thoughts and feelings still come up now at the day of the interview. In this way it is generally recommended for the interviewer to encourage specific memories of concrete moments in which s/he was confronted with the child's extremism and explore the level personal experience and thoughts/feelings then and now. Moments where the parent felt angry, shocked, puzzled, helpless etc. by this issue may then be explored in more depth – also how these emotional reactions were communicated to or played themselves out in the interaction to the daughter/son.

Complementary to this, the interview should then also go down a different – and more positive – line of questions that, for instance, ask the parent to think of and recount moments in which s/he felt proud, appreciative and supportive of the child despite of his/her extremist engagement. This pride and appreciation might even concern aspects of extremist activities. The interviewers may also ask about moments in which the parent felt s/he had understood what was going on there and grasp parts of the deeper layers of motivation that brought the child into extremist milieus. There might also be moments in

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which the parent feels that s/he has learned something important from the radicalised child. A valuable follow-up question would then always be whether and how this pity was communicated to the child and whether this communication, if it took place at all, was in any sense successful and impactful.

Further adding to the human aspect of the parent child relationship under the shadow of extremism is the question when the father/ mother, despite of all extremism related conflict, may have felt sorry for the daughter/ son and when he felt for him/her, be it because the parent is empathetic of actual suffering on the part of the child or s/he regrets the unfortunate situation that the child has gotten into, or for other reasons. As additionally helpful in these interview passages it was found to ask about what the parent would expect or hope the daughter/ son to do once s/he becomes a parent her/himself and has own children – i.e. the interviewee's grandchildren. This level of anticipation of a later phase of life in the light of parenthood would prompt the interview listeners to maximally activate their sense of responsibility in a life-course perspective.

Generally speaking, the lines of questions for parent interviews – but in widely analogous ways also for other interviewee groups – would on the one hand go into personal memories, perceptions and emotional reactions about the son/daughter (or client) and about certain concrete situations that have been experienced together. On the other hand they would also always explore how these perceptions and reactions have been communicated to the child (or client) at the time of the actual interaction – or rather, how they have not or unsuccessfully been communicated, since narrative interviews will always uncover perceptions that weren't even fully conscious to the person in the actual encounter scene let alone be expressed and successfully communicated.

To further augment their impact, these two lines of narratives (the personal reactions about the other and their expression to the other) should be embedded in and based upon another set of interview sequences in which the interviewee (the parent, practitioner, etc.) explores whether and in which ways s/he her/himself as younger persons had held attitudes that can be called extremist and resentful or even violent, and also under which circumstances this might occur even today and which protective factors may come in to moderate and neutralize such impulses.

In combination these strategies of narrative interviewing are quite capable of conveying to the young – at-risk – audience of interview listeners a sense of humanness and human relationship that they had not directly experienced themselves too much or at all with their parents (or the practitioner) – and which, as a narrative media input, are able to support

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processes of personal development and deradicalisation with most clients (at least those that are not in need of a more intense intervention of psychiatric care).

Hence, what in earlier media and testimonial projects used to function as a somewhat disjointed assortment of brief emotional – sometimes sensational – statements from various victims/ survivors and former perpetrators/ terrorists, would in the EDNA approach become truly narrative and co-narrative. This means that the personal self-expression would be given more space, breadth, systemic social and (family) historical context, and would thus assume a greater degree of reflexivity and listener appeal. It is quite emblematic, for instance, that the EDNA approach's systemic and narrative enhancement strategy would include interviewing the interviewers and project creators themselves in order for them to add their personal and biographical perspectives on the issue – and thus opening up even wider the span of co-narration and reflection about experiences of violent extremism and group-focused hatred.

As a consequence, EDNA's narrative approach is able to induce a much more profound deradicalising impact. For it does not only confront the clients with brief emotional/ sensational statements of self-expressions by victims/ survivors and former, whereby it remains unclear what the implicit appeal to the audience really would be and if the appeal is to get to the point of being able to give some emotional/ sensational statements of this kind themselves it may be seen as quite questionable whether this would have a sustainable impact of deradicalisation. Rather, the EDNA approach entices and empowers the clients to engage in forms of – co-narrative – exchange which is based on trust, curiosity, self-expression and (self-) reflexivity and which opens up new and more comprehensive levels of narrative exploration – and thus supports taking responsibility in a life-course perspective.