

European Platform of Deradicalisation (EDNA):

Guidelines and questions/ interaction strategies for the interviews with young people/ formers/ clients who were engaged in violent extremism (of different sorts)

by Harald Weilnböck



*With the financial support of the Prevention of and Fight against Crime Programme
European Commission – Directorate-General Home Affairs.*

*This publication reflects the views of the author, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which
may be made of the information contained therein.*

*The European platform of Deradicalising Narratives (EDNA) is co-financed by Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung
(Federal Agency of Civic Education)*

More info:
PD. Dr. Harald Weilnböck (Ph.D.)
- Co-Chair RAN-Derad –
Radicalisation Awareness Network

<http://www.weilnboeck.net/>
weilnboeck@cultures-interactive.de

Guidelines and questions/ interaction strategies for the interviews with young people/ formers/ clients_who were engaged in violent extremism (of different sorts)

by Harald Weilnböck

Other than originally expected when drafting the EDNA proposal, it turned out that the interviews with young people (formers) from different sorts of violent extremism (Jihadist/ Islamist, rightwing extremist, leftwing extremist) would work in quite similar ways. Hence it proved unnecessary and misleading to devise different guidelines for each of these groups. The main reason for this surprising similarity in methodology is that the interview technique follows narrative-biographical and open-process procedures. Therefore, even the external follow-up questions are based on relatively general strategies (with all different groups of young people/ formers/ clients) or are triggered inductively through specific hints within the individual interview.

As was stated in the guidelines for parents and practitioner interviews (in reference to “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).

Trust-building in view of a formerly radicalised and violent young person means of course to help anticipate and prevent any reaction of paranoia (on the part of the

More info:

PD. Dr. Harald Weilnböck (Ph.D.)

- Co-Chair RAN-Derad –

Radicalisation Awareness Network

<http://www.weilnoeck.net/>

weilnoeck@cultures-interactive.de

future beneficiaries of the audio passages in future interaction work) in the sense that the interviewee is viewed as “traitor” or as being “brain-washed by the system”.

Hence, producing deradicalising narratives/ testimonials from interviews with *young people/ formers* of (different sorts) of violent extremism requires an approach that, to a large degree, will need to aim at obtaining personal and biographical narrations about the person’s life history besides and beyond the issues of radicalisation/ extremism in the narrower sense.

Therefore, as with the other interviewee groups (parents, practitioners), some base elements of biographical-narrative interviewing – as the maximally open *initial question* and the (internal and external) *narrative follow-up questions* – will be applied. These questions would also aim at obtaining accounts about the person’s family history (of the parents and the grandparents) as seen through the young client’s eyes.

As to the initial question that is used in interviews with young people/ formers/ clients, the following line of statements may be taken as a guideline – to then be personalized vis-à-vis the individual client:

“We would like to work with and find ways to be helpful for young people who got radicalised and were recruited into life-styles/ organisations of violent extremism and/or group-oriented hostility. We would like to first focus on your life history as a former member/ follower of such organisation or life-style.

Hence, we would like to ask you to tell us your life story and your family history – up to the time when you began to radicalize in any way.

You may proceed with this as you want; you may want to begin as early as possible; and you may tell anything that you feel is relevant and that you feel okay about relating to us.

You have as much time as you like to tell your history. 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, we can still have a second interview at some later point in time.”

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

However, 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.

External questions to the interviews with young people/ formers/ clients:

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 an adapted form with reference to what the person has already express on this topic/ question.

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

- Can you tell us/me about moments/ situations when you noticed your fascination about violent extremist groups and activities (of any sort) and when you noticed an impulse to join this subculture? Of which kind were these moments/ situations? (further narrative in-depth follow-up questions on any details that the interviewee relates her/his account)

- If there were key persons in this violent extremist group/ subculture who stood out in your perception and/or approached you in view of you joining

More info:

PD. Dr. Harald Weinböck (Ph.D.)

- Co-Chair RAN-Derad –

Radicalisation Awareness Network

<http://www.weinboeck.net/>

weinboeck@cultures-interactive.de

the group, can you recount the situation when you perceived/ met this person(s)? (as always, further narrative in-depth follow-up questions on any details that the interviewee relates)

- What do you know about whether or not – and how – violent extremism (of any sort) played a role for your parents and grandparents or any other members of the family? (further narrative in-depth follow-up questions)
- In the process of getting closer to violent extremist groups/ activities, did you, already then, have hesitations, doubts, or were of two minds about them? What did you then think about these early observations later on – and today?
- In the moment when you actually joined the group/ subculture, what else went on in your life then – or shortly before? What kind of life phase was this?
- What made you feel that your involvement in the group/ activity was answering your personal needs? What in this made you happier than you were before? What helped you with certain challenges and problems which were current in your life in those days?
- In terms of the hatred and violence that occurred in this group/ context? What was your part/ role in this? What did you feel about it then – and how do you view it today? How do these experiences resonate with earlier experiences in other social contexts or in your family?
- In terms of experiences of humiliation and subjugation which sometimes occur in such groups/ subcultures, what was your personal experience? How do these experiences resonate with earlier experiences in other social contexts or in your family?
- In terms of the social community, the sense of personal respect (self esteem) and of belonging together in this group/ subculture, what were your personal experiences in these respects? What did you feel about the social aspects then? How do you view them today?

More info:

PD. Dr. Harald Weilnböck (Ph.D.)
- Co-Chair RAN-Derad –
Radicalisation Awareness Network

<http://www.weilnboeck.net/>

weilnboeck@cultures-interactive.de

- In terms of gender concepts about what it means to be a man or a woman (to have manliness or femininity) which were current and characteristic in the group/ subculture, how did you perceive and respond to these gender concepts? What do you think about this today?
- In terms of ideological issues (politics/ religion and similar contexts) – and in terms of perceptions of injustice and social grievance – which were communicated in the group/ subculture, what did these issues/ideologies/ mean for you? In which actual life situations did these issues become relevant for you personally – both in the group/ subculture and outside or before you joined? What is your perspective today?
- Looking back on your involvement in the violent extremist group/ subculture, what do you still today miss about it, partly or whole heartedly? In what ways are you still attached to what was your life and thinking then? (What kinds of thoughts/ memories, reactions and feelings come up when you think back?)
- Can you tell us/me about moments/ situations when you noticed you want to get away from the violent extremist group/ subculture? Were there disappointments/ disillusionments? Was there dissatisfaction? Which kind? What were the situations in which this feeling occurred? (as always, further narrative in-depth follow-up questions on any details that the interviewee relates)
- In case the distancing from the group/ extremism was a longer process, what stages and situations occurred? Which experiences did you make along this process? Which occurrences/ persons supported your process and further development? Which ones were hindering it?
- What in your current life makes you happy/ feel fulfilled that you were able to disengage from and leave the violent extremist group/ subculture. In which situations do you still find it difficult to deal with this part of your history? How, if at all, are you still partly attached?
- Can you tell us about moments in which you felt sorry for anything that you have engaged in or committed?

More info:

PD. Dr. Harald Weinböck (Ph.D.)

- Co-Chair RAN-Derad –

Radicalisation Awareness Network

<http://www.weilboeck.net/>

weilboeck@cultures-interactive.de

- Regarding the measures of rehabilitation (derad) and social assistance, which memories do you have about situations in which you felt that a certain approach had a good impact and was successful with you personally as a client of the intervention? Can you tell these situations in detail? How did you feel within the different stages of the measure?
- Reversely, which memories do you have about situations in which you felt that a certain method or technique did not have a good impact and was not successful with you as a client – and may even have aggravated things in certain ways?
- Can you remember and tell about moments in which you felt confused, angry or relived, enriched, touched etc. by any aspect/ part of any measure of social work/ rehabilitation (derad)? Can you elaborate on such situations and your thoughts about them today?
- Along the way or within such social work/ rehabilitative measures, did you meet other young people with a similar profile and fate? What were they about? What was their pathway?
- Can you remember and tell about moments where you respected your co-participants or the practitioners/ facilitators of such measures of social work/ rehabilitation ... or in which you felt you, personally, learned something important from them?
- Can you remember and tell about moments in which you felt you understood what was going on with you personally and mentally during the time of radicalisation – and/ or in terms of your life-history in a broader perspective? Can you elaborate on your observations and thoughts?