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The Narrative of Victimization and Deradicalization: An Expert View

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ABSTRACT

While the study of victimology and radicalization mainly focuses on those who suffered from terrorist attacks, this article explores the role of victimological processes in deradicalization. Experts from different international deradicalization initiatives were interviewed. Using the narrative framework with its three key concepts—identity, emotion, and culture—as set forth by Pemberton and Aarten in this issue, the relationship between victimization and deradicalization is more thoroughly examined. Key findings include the delicacy of the term “victim” in radicals’ narrative identity, the power of narrative in triggering and transmitting emotions, and the importance of a former radical that acknowledges the narratives of the radical and offers alternative narratives to their radicalized ideologies.

The past fifteen years has seen a marked interest in the plight of victims of terrorism and political violence, in policy and research.¹ The increased public profile of victims of terrorism and political violence is accompanied by calls for recognition and acknowledgment of their suffering. The way this recognition is framed includes presenting the position of victims as sharply distinct from, and opposed to, those of their victimizers.² This sharp delineation of victims and perpetrators of terrorism is regularly mimicked by academics studying the victimology and perpetration of terrorism and political violence. The victimology of terrorism thus mainly revolves around the study of the consequences of terrorist acts for those suffering the attacks.

Its definition, however, is somewhat constricted to a small population.³ The social construction of terms like crime and victimization, abuse of power, terrorism, and radicalization, in particular when captured in law and public policy, means that many victims are not viewed as such by other societal actors. Yet, victimization can apply to many other situations than those involving officially certified victims.⁴ This position lies at the heart of this article. Instead of addressing the consequences of political violence and terrorism for their victims, this article intend to further the understanding of the role of victimological processes in the perpetration of and stepping away from politically motivated violence by interviewing experts in this field and practitioners working for deradicalization and disengagement initiatives.⁵ The authors will argue this position from a narrative point of view as set forth by Pemberton and Aarten in

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this issue. Before this is done, it will first justify the application of victimology in the field of political violence and terrorism by identifying what role victimization can play in radicalization and deradicalization as discussed in theory and previous research.

The Role of Victimization in (De-)Radicalization

A stereotypical black and white distinction between victims and offenders is likely to be deployed in public discourse, media depictions, and policy statements. In the stereotypes described by Nils Christie's notion of the ideal victim⁶ or Roy Baumeister's Myth of Pure Evil,⁷ this distinction is categorical, with the good and wholesome victims being preyed on by fundamentally evil offenders.

In crime, reality is often at odds with this neat, black and white division between victims and offenders. There is a good deal of overlap between victim and offender populations.⁸ Adolescent men are both overrepresented in the victim and offender statistics, with mere luck or accident regularly determining in which category they find themselves. Additionally, experiences, perceptions, and narratives of victimization frequently inspire perpetrators' behavior. Retaliation for past victimization often underlies violence,⁹ where a sense of entitlement caused by victimization can provide adequate justification for one's own acts.¹⁰ This seems particularly true of group-based violence, such as in political violence and terrorism: narratives of victimization ranging back through the years can still provide motive and cover for violence and bloodshed in the present.¹¹ As Volkan¹² shows in his book *Bloodlines*, these so-called *chosen traumas* form a moral nucleus for politically motivated action, including violence. The experience of being righteously aggrieved is a particular strong motivation for morally motivated violence, particularly if this sense of historical victimization can be connected to a present-day threat. The link between victimization experiences and radicalization can be direct, with victimization experiences serving as a causal factor in the development and extremity of religious and political views that may motivate political violence and terrorism. For example, McCauley and Moskaleiko describe how personal victimization is one of the pathways, and one of main explanations given by suicide terrorists, to individual radicalization.¹³ The link can also be more indirect, in the sense that victimization experiences are a factor in the escalation of violence, which may in turn give rise to radicalized political/religious views.¹⁴ An example of this indirect relationship can be found in the recent work on traumatization and the development of extremist political ideology.¹⁵ In a study by Canetti and colleagues on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the relationship between exposure to conflict violence and a change in citizens' political attitudes and behavior was explored. They found that a prolonged exposure to political violence increased individuals' psychological distress, which evoked stronger perceptions of threat. The perceived threat, in turn, stimulated political attitudes favoring militarism. According to these scholars “this causal chain fuels a destructive cycle of violence that is hard to break.”¹⁶

In addition, the understanding that offenders are intrinsically and inherently evil, as suggested by the myth of the Pure Evil, imposes a retributive perspective on counterterrorism.¹⁷ As Bjorgo and Horgan¹⁸ note: “‘Once a terrorist, always a terrorist!’ So goes conventional wisdom.” Through this frame, the fight against terrorism becomes the fight against terrorists, which can lead to renewed victimization by society on the side of the “terrorist.” This suggests that a full endorsement of the Myth of Pure Evil stands in the way of engaging in any positive manner with radicals/extremists/terrorists. Yet in most cases, those committing evil acts are not any more or less *intrinsically evil* than those who do not. This does not in itself

excuse the behavior, but it does suggest that changing their behavior is a real possibility. The point here is that in counterterrorism and counterradicalization policy different issues might stand in the way of interacting meaningfully with the radical and instead deepen the victimization experience on the part of the radical.

Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Studying Victimization and Deradicalization: An Expert View

Having discussed the necessity, but difficulty, of studying victimological processes in (de-)radicalization, the next step is to understand how victimization works in deradicalization from political violence. In this issue, Pemberton and Aarten posited narrative as a metaphor for the study of victimization in political violence. They argue that since victimization is best understood through narrative¹⁹ and narrative is a root metaphor for studying radicalization,²⁰ narrative seems the best route to studying victimization in radicalization and deradicalization.

The narrative framework was discussed in detail in that article and will therefore not be repeated in detail in this article. In summary, narrative is an account of events in the order in which they occurred to make a point.²¹ However, not any event will do. A narrative begins with a particular event and this event “is out of the ordinary, representing a deviation from the typical or routine aspects of the individual’s life”²² or what Burke refers to as “intentional trouble.”²³ The notion that intentional trouble is involved in getting the narrative ball rolling can be connected to the victimization experience: the experience of suffering intentional harm. Previous research has shown that narratives of victimization can play a key role as nadir experiences and turning points in the stories that radicals and terrorists construct about their own lives and that of the group to which they belong.²⁴ Either at the individual level or the group level a sense of past victimization can provide a powerful moral motive for subsequent acts of violence and aggression.²⁵

Narrative is central to the development of identity and sense and meaning making in the aftermath of victimization experiences, to triggering or transmitting emotions and to the connection with the wider cultural context.²⁶ Pemberton and Aarten have done a first exploration of better understanding the relationship between victimological processes and radicalization through this narrative framework. This article empirically explores the relevance of this narrative framework in better understanding the relationship between victimization and deradicalization. Specifically, this article has two aims: (1) to examine how victimization is related to deradicalization and (2) to uncover how identity, emotions, and culture can be a useful frame to understand these victimological processes in deradicalization of political violence.

The focus is merely on deradicalization, since only interviews with experts in the field of deradicalization were held. To understand the relationship between victimization and radicalization from a narrative point of view, this article suggests collecting life narratives of (de) radicalized individuals. In addition, since very little is known about the processes involved in deradicalization, the authors believe this is especially a pertinent topic to further explore while using a new framework.

Method

Between September 2014 and September 2015, experts in the field of deradicalization and disengagement were approached. Based on their expertise and experience, they were able to

give their views on the victimological processes in deradicalization and disengagement. Specifically, they shared views on the contribution of victimization to deradicalization processes, and possible contributions of victimization in counternarratives.

A qualitative design was chosen to obtain an in-depth understanding of the victimological processes in deradicalization. Semi-structured interviewing was the primary data collection tool. Choosing a qualitative method, instead of a more quantitative methodology, provided rich data in an area of research that is still relatively unexplored. Each interview was combined with an extensive documentary analysis of the background of the expert and his or her organization. Each basic interview schedule was adapted according to the background information on the experts and their organizations.

Fieldwork was not limited to the Netherlands, but extended to different countries including Germany, Sweden, and United Kingdom, and involved interviewing experts from organizations that focused on disengagement from right-wing extremism, organizations that focused on deradicalization from *ihadism*, and organizations that were involved in prevention and repression of radicalization. Victim organizations were also interviewed. In total, sixteen interviews with experts were held.²⁷

When analyzing the empirical data, a two-step approach was used. First, all interviews were read in detail, looking for quotes about victimization and deradicalization. These quotes were then checked to see how they fitted within the narrative framework: specifically, whether these quotes were related to identity, emotions, and culture. It was found that all references made to victimization by the interviewed experts could be placed under the headings of identity and meaning-making, emotions and culture confirming the usefulness of using a narrative framework to further the understanding of victimological processes in deradicalization.

Results

The objective of this article was to interview experts from different organizations about the role of victimization in deradicalization.²⁸ As the results show, this role is highly complex and takes a different form depending on the population targeted or the methodology used. The results, therefore, summarize the main points that experts brought forth during their interviews regarding the relationship between victimization and deradicalization from a narrative perspective. While some topics and issues were more often cited by different experts than others, this article is careful in drawing generalizations from these results. Instead, these interviews highlight the importance of looking at deradicalization through a narrative lens.

Identity and Meaning-Making

Victimization

According to the narrative framework, specific episodes, especially negative ones, take an important place in one's life story and forms one's identity. Numerous studies have found a relationship between victimization and radicalization,²⁹ and the interviewed experts underscore this relationship as well. In deradicalization, however, it is the acknowledgment or recognition of it that plays an important role. As experts state, this acknowledgment or

recognition of victimization can lead to some kind of “societal approval” of the narrative of the radical, which, in turn, enhances the connection with his or her social surroundings.

While working on deradicalization, professionals argue the importance of the (former) radical him or herself having an adequate understanding of the negative experiences in their past that contributed to their violence:

It has two sides. On one side, you must objectively provide a person perspective regarding work, a partner, a home, or things like that. On the other side, it is also giving them that recognition. But they have to discover that themselves. You have to make people more self-conscious again. It does not involve you acting as a therapist being nice every time so that person regains his or her confidence or feels less victimized.

While victimization plays a role in helping individual deradicalize, there are two issues experts highlight. On the one hand, a number of experts caution that (former) radicals should not be allowed to merely interpret their own misdeeds as justified reactions to wrongdoing. Even granted that they have their own victimization experiences, they should also be enticed to acknowledge their own acts of violence as unwarranted. The experts state that victimization is merely one side of the coin and the other side is equally important:

At some point you have to disconnect things from one another. On one side that you were a victim or you feel like a victim, and on the other side your current behavior: this should not be seen as a one-on-one explanation. You may have had a rotten childhood. That is fine and that should be recognized. But it does not mean that every time you pass a foreigner on the street you beat him up. That is not a logical conclusion. The issue here is your biography. People must come to terms with themselves about their biography. There should be less “and thus, and thus” in a story. This is what people often do, because they need that causality. It is about disconnecting experiences that involved “and thus I did this.” Especially when “thus” is negative. They have to learn how to get the positive out of an experience.

On the other hand, in numerous interviews, experts find a “recognition of victimization” a difficult concept to grasp as it consists of many layers. The difficulty does not always lie with the professional recognition that the radicalized individual was victimized, but it is often the individual himself or herself that has difficulty accepting it:

The word “victim” rarely comes up in general in this type of work. Because if I would throw that around, most clients would go “what are you calling me? [...] They definitely don’t want to see themselves as victim. It is because there would be an association with fear and being weak and they want to be an agent, they want to be in control. And I think you are getting one of the key factors here: power, control.”

It does not mean that radical individuals did not experience any victimization. Instead, it they find the term victim to be disempowering and passive³⁰ and refuse to use victimization as a means to describe their experiences. One way these individuals can retain their agency is through ideology.

Ideology as Meaning-Making

Ideology is a way of making meaning: it is a way of explaining the causes of the event, the consequences on him or herself and the further development of their story.³¹ In other words, ideology is the narrative attention that is needed in certain events—such as victimization—to help construct the radical’s life story. Indeed, the way that a person responds to these key

personal event memories is important to the way the person subsequently defines his or herself.³² An ideology becomes part of someone's identity, but is also a means to incorporate victimization experiences in a manner that does not denote passivity and helplessness. In other words, victimization as such is often rejected as being part of the radical's narrative identity. Instead, the victimization experience itself is transformed through embracing ideology as a way to give meaning to and deal with such negative events.

But while many do not identify themselves as victims, in the life narrative of the radicalized individual, the story of his or her own (sense of) victimization is given attention in deradicalization initiatives. Research has shown that victimization has an enduring purchase on his or her current lived experience. In explaining current or recent actions, particularly when justification is called for, the individual will draw on these experiences. Deradicalization efforts acknowledge the importance of dealing with negative experiences and focus on changing the events of radicalized individuals from contamination (turning an experience into a negative one) to redemption (turning an experience into a positive one) scripts.³³ Letting individuals see themselves as a perpetrator and as a victim allows them to reflect on their past and accept their responsibility, which, according to the interviewed experts, helps in the deradicalization process. By linking the past with the present and future allows the radical to construct a coherent life story that explains how the self came to be and where it is headed in the future, giving his life (new) semblance of meaning, unity and purpose.³⁴ And while different experts stress that it is not central in their initiatives—since they mainly focus on how behavior and ideology can be changed—victimization is often implicitly tackled.

In many deradicalization and disengagement initiatives, the focus is mainly on developing new or adapted identities and ideologies for deradicalized individuals. Experts are more likely to see victimization as playing an implicit role in rebuilding an individual's new identity. Many agree that individuals need to distance themselves from the ideology in order to deradicalize. However, leaving an ideology behind is not done "cold turkey" but tends to be a more gradual process:

Someone's identity, once they, in addition to being a soldier for the white race are also a father, that new identity can start to replace and fill the need where the extremist movement has previously filled in terms of someone giving a sense of place in the world. That is something that we see across the board. There are very few eureka moments, there are very few members that woke up one day and someone made a really compelling argument to them and they renounce their ideology. It tends to be more of a process.

Building an identity follows a similar process, consisting of past and present experiences:

It doesn't work when you say "okay, it is all new" [the identity]. There is always some history in the current identity. So it's something like rebuilding. There was also an identity before becoming a Neo-Nazi. So it doesn't work if you say, okay new identity. It is something like rebuilding and handling all parts of the history. That is the main idea.

What needs to be recognized here is the role of the life narrative of the radical in maintaining the sense of self-continuity throughout time.³⁵ A radical and swift break with the person's identity as a Neo-Nazi or *jihadi* does not offer much in the way of providing this continuity. That type of swift catharsis appears a less likely scenario than a more gradual process in which elements of the identity as a radical are retained, reworked or reinterpreted.

Emotion

According to the narrative framework, narratives can trigger emotions and they can transmit emotions.³⁶ Both have gotten much merit in the interviews with deradicalization experts, where the former is explicated in the experts' discussion of the emotions that are involved in radicalization and deradicalization. The latter, the transmission of emotions, can be translated into how experts saw radicals looking at the experiences of their victims. Both are described in more detail below.

The Radical's Emotions

The narrative framework posits that nuclear episodes, such as victimization, can trigger strong emotion(s).³⁷ These emotions can give rise to a host of action tendencies.³⁸ In line with previous research,³⁹ the interviewed experts named different negative emotions that they considered to be related to radicalization. Many found the radicalized individuals to have feelings of anger and hatred. Other emotions mentioned were feelings of dissatisfaction and humiliation. Experts also argued the importance of examining how the individual's emotions led them to evaluate a situation or experience that subsequently led to (radical) action. They proposed that the best way to counter these emotionally laden situations was for them and other practitioners to introduce other emotions that could lead to a renewed evaluation of the situation. As stated by one of the experts: "The idea that you can tackle an emotionally complex situation with rationality is very questionable." In other words, they argue that deradicalization initiatives should not only be based on a rational approach, but also focus on and incorporate affect. And while rational choice has dominated terrorism research,⁴⁰ experts clearly argue for the importance of examining and tackling the radicals' emotions in their line of work.

It can also help them disentangle the different emotions and the order in which they influence radicalization and deradicalization. One of the initiatives, for example, works with a model that distinguishes between primary and secondary emotions. Primary emotions are those that are felt as a first response to a situation. These emotions are often fear and happiness. Secondary emotions replace the primary emotions relatively quickly in a situation, making it difficult to understand what the situation is really about. Anger is often considered a secondary emotion:

They [right-wing extremists] have an excess of primary emotions which they make into secondary emotions. This makes them look to the outside of the world as cold-hearted bastards. But they are not, they are really feeling a lot, but they cannot handle it. So they find a mechanism to survive it.

With this quote, the interviewed expert implies that the turning of primary emotions into secondary emotions is done through narrative. That is, the emotion that follows an event is influenced by the way the radical sees or wants to see him- or herself. This results in a transformation of secondary emotions that are more in line with the radical's narrative identity. According to this expert, a former radical himself, the radical does not want to see himself as helpless or passive. Instead, he takes control over his life and the "mechanism" that will help him survive is through anger, indignation, and moral outrage from which he can act.

Furthermore, experts highlight the complexity of the concept victimization when working with emotions but also the risk that comes along with the narrative of victimization:

If you have primary emotions which are shut off, and to be a victim, you have to be aware of your primary emotions. You have to be able to feel it. [...] This is a problem when you are talking about being a victim, if you are talking about the clients I work with as victims. You cannot process it into secondary emotions because it does not work. So first you have to learn how to feel primary emotions and then we can talk about it. Okay, lets be a victim, how does that correlate to your world, because that is not an option in the world that we are in. They will say: I am not a victim, I am the force. I am not a victim, I am a soldier. The people I come across are not victims. Lets say I am have a problem with society, so the people I hurt, they are not victims, they are participants of war. So they are legal targets. And that is also when you look at distancing, dehumanization, black and white thinking. If you have legal targets, you don't have to feel remorse. So victimization is complicated.

This counters the notion that empathy with their victims' suffering and the emotions that accompany this can be marshaled as a means to get the radical to see the error of his ways. This particular point—acknowledging or understanding their victims' suffering—is further discussed in the next section on emotions. What this quote further shows is that radicals do not see the presence of victims or victimization at all. Any fear, sadness, or humiliation on the part of those who are legitimate opponents in the eyes of the radical should not be interpreted as potential antidotes to neutralization techniques. Instead, depending on how they are placed into the radical's own narrative, they can be understood as success stories, as evidence of the weakness of the opponent. This is in line with Shadd Maruna's⁴¹ work that shows that many offenders who desist from the perpetration of violence view themselves as more rather than less moral: overcoming the conditions that led them to violence in the first place is felt to be evidence of this fact. Instead of disparaging their former selves, they maintain a strong sense of continuity with their past narrative selves, chalking up their actions to causes outside of themselves. With regard to former radicals: they can maintain that their ideology, religious attitude, and/or political position is still accurate, but now find other, maybe more effective ways of attempting to achieve these goals.⁴²

In summary, gaining insight into the emotions of radicals is often the primary inroad into understanding and changing the behavior of the extremist, at least initially. Working on a broader emotional perspective is an important part of disengaging: "They need to be provided with a broader perspective on their own emotions, letting them know that there is more than hatred."

Understanding Victims' Experiences

Narrative also transmits emotions. This transmission often takes form in preventive strategies where formers and/or victims of political violence tell their narrative to the general public.

According to Oatley's taxonomy of emotional response,⁴³ there is an assimilative and accommodative schema. The first draws the listener in, leading to empathic and interactional responses toward the narrator. The second schema has to overcome resistance from the listener, making easy assimilation more difficult. Rehabilitative efforts to achieve desistance attempt to bring about an understanding of the consequences of the perpetrators' acts for their victims. This connects with the research that consistently shows lack of empathy as a criminogenic risk factor.⁴⁴ Rehabilitation programs increasingly feature victim awareness and victim empathy components,⁴⁵ which is in line with the assimilative schema. However, almost unanimously, experts are of the opinion that collaboration between formers and

victims is more effective in preventive strategies than in deradicalization initiatives. In fact, employing victim narratives as a deradicalization method could be counterproductive, which is in line with Oatley's accommodative schema:

We thought that if a victim would tell his or her story, they [the extremists] would stop. And there were a number of studies that pointed towards this relationship. However, we realized very quickly that this would not work. If you asked a victim to tell her story to a hard-boiled Neo-nazi or jihadist, an opposite reaction was found. They would say: "It is a good thing. They should have gotten more of you. You feel bad because we shot your husband to bits. Well that was our purpose otherwise the ETA or the IRA would not have done it."⁴³

In other words, increasing victim awareness is difficult to realize in programs targeting deradicalization. Here the notion of competitive victimhood (CV)⁴⁶ can be important to explain the problems with raising victim awareness among radicals. As Noor and colleagues emphasize "in the CV state, members of conflicting groups experience a strong wish, and thus also strive to establish that their in-group was subjected to more injustice and suffering at the hands of the out-group than the other way around."⁴⁶ Due to the competitive nature of CV, groups are less likely to experience and display empathy for victimization of their adversaries,⁴⁷ even when this amounts to equal or greater suffering than that of the ingroup. Some experts find it difficult to represent two different kinds of interest at the same time: that of formers and that of victims: "Sometimes there is a former getting in contact with a victim, but it is difficult. As an NGO we don't work with victims, because its two shoes on the same person, but two shoes."

The victim's narrative would have defensive, counterproductive effects on the deradicalization process. For this reason, the practitioner from the above quote only works with formers. However, other initiatives highlight the impact of a combined narrative of both former and victim on the public:

We think that a lot of the time when they come together, their message can be more impactful than they would be alone. Essentially, formers and survivors together can be greater than the sum of their parts. [...] I think that sometimes when formers speak, there can be a perception that they shouldn't necessarily be given that platform or that they shouldn't be forgiven for what they have done. But if you have a former standing up with a survivor and that survivor is now working with that individual. There are instances where they have been directly interacting with each other and they have forgiven them, it is disarming somewhat.

By giving the platform to formers and victims, the counternarratives become credible and empathetic, and often reaches an assimilative audience:

I think formers can add a level of credibility, having lived it themselves, knowing what it was really like. If they can say these things, then we can start to alter these perceived rewards and costs. And so too are victims, on the empathy level. They can start to play with the emotional counter-narratives: How can you really do this? You are just killing civilians.

In other words, formers with victims are seen as credible storytellers, who are capable of transmitting their narrative and its emotional content to an assimilative audience. How the story of both former and victim can have an impact is still under much debate, but experts highlight that success stories are mainly found in preventive strategies. In deradicalization initiatives, experts find that radicals are more likely to be an accommodative listener when confronted with a victim's narrative.

Culture

Cultural narratives provide the very images, metaphors, scripts, and plots that individuals can relate to and shape their narrative identity. These cultural narratives not only provide a sense of self-continuity, but also continuity with the other members of one's community.⁴⁸

In cultural narratives social interactions play a key role. Through interactions with others stories about personal experiences, such as victimization, are processed, edited, reinterpreted, retold, and gradually represented internally. Furthermore, being exposed to a range of social and discursive influences allows the storyteller to develop a more integrative narrative identity.⁴⁹ Many of the interviewed experts discussed how a former offers the chance to reinterpret the radical's narrative identity. The former can provide a menu of metaphors, scripts, and plots the radical can choose from. And through co-construction of the storyteller—in this case the radical—and the listener—in this case the former—the narrative can be reconstructed.⁵⁰ In other words, the mainstream cultural narrative can be adopted in the radical's narrative identity. Experts find that a former extremist can help re-interpret the story and act as a vessel that channels society's main norms and values in a manner that helps the radical to accept them. Furthermore, the "listener" influences the conversation by eliciting opinions using his or her expertise to make evaluations.⁵¹ The experienced victimization, for example, is re-evaluated by the former. And instead of opposing the subcultural master-narrative inherent to the radical's ideology, the former extremist offers an alternative to this.

Former extremists are the credible messengers that can build a relationship with extremists who want to deradicalize. The identification that the extremists experience with these formers lends credence and legitimacy to their views. The same narrative will be interpreted in a very different and less positive way if the source is a traditional authority. Instead of initial resistance the former is more likely to be met with assimilative listening styles (which ties in nicely with narrative emotion), while his or her narrative also has the ring of authenticity to it. This strategy exploits the inherent Janus-face that Francesca Polletta⁵² analyses in narratives. She emphasizes that the same stories may be seen as unique/special versus idiosyncratic/unrepresentative; universal/of interest versus mundane/uninteresting; authentic versus deceptive/manipulative; an expression of potency versus an expression of powerlessness. The narrative of the former is more likely to be interpreted as an authentic tale to which the radical can aspire, while the same story can be seen as an act of deception or as a cop-out from another source.

We can be a credible messenger and we can link people from this world with people they don't trust here, like psychiatrists, therapists or police or whatever. If someone is violent, we can start training or go to the gym, if they need aggression replacement training we put that in. But that is based on a strong alliance and will help them normalize: how does it feel to interact with the world.

Besides trust, the messenger also becomes a "story of hope. They use him as a tool to think with. His story inspires how they can change."

Formers are also considered credible messengers in preventing individuals from (further) radicalizing:

We make some counter-narratives with former neo-Nazis, video projects on YouTube, texts, writings from former neo-Nazis or discuss on the Internet or with children in schools, something like prevention.

Using former neo-Nazis “as a living counternarrative” is part of rebuilding their identity and dropping out process. They want to do something good to make up for the bad things they have done. They not only “talk the talk” but also “walk the walk” of re-interpreting their former actions in a manner that maintains coherence and continuity,⁵³ but also offers a real possibility of behavioral and often attitudinal change.

Discussion

This article argues that the narrative framework can be a useful starting point in the research field on political violence and terrorism to give more insight into the victimological processes related to deradicalization. Specifically, it looked at the role that victimization plays in deradicalization. The theoretical foundations have been laid down by Pemberton and Aarten in this issue. This article brought together the main findings from the theoretical framework with practice; the experts’ view from different preventive and deradicalization initiatives on how victimization and victimological processes play a role in deradicalization. Not only is there a better understanding of how victimological processes play a role in deradicalization, the experts’ views support the idea that narrative can be considered a useful framework in this field. It appears to be the theory-in-use in their own work. Based on the interviews, the following conclusions can be drawn. As was done in the results section, this article needs to stress again that the conclusions below cannot be generalized to the field of deradicalization. In total 16 interviews were conducted, reaching a diverse range of expertise, but these interviews have only reached the tip of the iceberg in the understanding of the victimological processes in deradicalization. Instead, these findings and conclusions highlight the value of a new framework in the study of terrorism and political violence; that of narrative.

The Role of Identity and Meaning-Making in the Relationship Between Victimization and Deradicalization

The narrative framework emphasizes the role of victimization in the sense of self and identity in persons engaged in the process of deradicalization.

Disentangling the impact of victimization is, however, made complicated due to the fact that it is not likely that individuals will view themselves as victims and conceptualize their actions as reactions to victimization. Instead, the radical ideology can provide the means to transform a victimization event from a possible sign of weakness or defeat into a rallying cry for action and demonstration of strength. Victimization seems to provide part of the moral justification, or necessity even, for subsequent violence on the part of the radical him- or herself. But as this behavior in reality, or at least in intent, turns the tables on the victimization, the radical no longer sees him- or herself as a victim, but as one who is in the process of or vanquishing his or her foes.

When the radical attempts to leave the extremist or terrorist group behind, he can be confronted with a negative reaction from society, which gives rise to a sense of a renewed but perhaps different sense of victimization. Acknowledging this possible experience of victimization is an important element of deradicalization initiatives, even though the experts do not suggest that former radicals should be let off the hook in the confrontation with their former misdeeds. However, care should be taken to see how the radical ideology offered a

transformative sense of protection and meaning to previous victimization experiences, and how leaving the radical group behind can already involve renewed feelings of vulnerability.

It is important to note that the interviewed experts largely confirm the authors' view that interpreting radical views is best understood as a matter of identity, rather than merely of attitude. These radical views are a means through which people make sense of the world and of their selves. It is important to integrate life narratives in future research on the cognitions of radicals and those who have attempted to leave political violence behind. The authors understand how life narratives play in their sense of self, in their construction of their personal ideologies and the implications this has for deradicalization efforts. Fortunately, this field has already progressed beyond viewing terrorists either as purely rational actors or as mentally deranged, and are beginning to see political violence in terms of the goals and quests on which people embark to provide meaning in their lives.⁵⁴ To this it should be added that it is not only the "self as motivated agent" that is important to the understanding of what makes a person turn to radicalization, but also the "self as autobiographical author."⁵⁵ However misguided a person might be in understanding his or her own life story, and however biased this account may be, it nevertheless forms an important base from which further actions develop. Not only for the radical himself, but also for practitioners helping individuals deradicalize.

The life story of radicals and former radicals can contain a number of so-called narrative ruptures. Any severe form of victimization can disturb the sense of continuity a life narrative seeks to maintain: sense- and meaning-making in the aftermath of victimization concerns reworking and rebuilding this life narrative. Ideology has been mentioned by several experts as a way that radicals make sense of previous victimization they have encountered. The fruits of this process can include the seeds of what eventually becomes a career in political violence and radical political activity. For those deeply embedded in radical groups and terrorist organizations, any move away from the former life can also be felt to be a narrative rupture, in which the same tasks are encountered. Given the current understanding of personality and identity as relying in large part on life narratives, this article proposes that the use of (victimization) narratives could be more fully applied to the study of terrorism and political violence than is done at the current moment.

The Role of Emotions in the Relationship Between Victimization and Deradicalization

Recently, terrorism research, like research into political phenomena more generally, has been engaging more fully with the increasingly rich literature on emotions. Haidt and colleagues⁵⁶ mention a number of different emotions associated with the experience of victimization: anxiety, hate, humiliation, fury, disgust, anger and moral outrage, shame, revenge, but also positive emotions, defiant pride, exhilaration, excitement, and ingroup love. Emotions are inherent to (understanding) the reactions to victimization and what drives individuals to action. As the experts argue, hate and anger are powerful emotions that are often found to drive individuals into radicalized behavior. Victimization narratives also transmit these emotions. Empathy and sympathy, for example, play an important role in understanding reactions to victimization and the transmission of emotions of victimization experiences.

The view that empathy for victims' experiences does not necessarily stimulate a (former) radical to feel remorse and guilt for his or her past wrongdoing was confirmed in the interviews. In general, the transmission of emotion through narrative is moderated by the

division between assimilative and accommodative listening.⁵⁷ In the former, the listener is biased toward agreeing with the messenger; in the latter to disagreeing and/ or viewing the messenger in an unfavorable light. This also underlies the importance of the understanding that who tells the story is as important as what is being communicated. The results of the interviews confirm that confronting radicals with the suffering of their victims is likely to trigger a defensive response, in which the victim got what was coming to him or her. Instead of triggering sympathy for their victims, tales of victimization of the erstwhile enemy can lead to phenomena signaling competitive victimhood. Either their own victimization experience or their sympathetic feelings toward ingroup members are likely to trump any compassion felt with the outgroup's sense of victimization. Indeed, pitting the victimization experience of the outgroup against that of the radical's him- or herself is more likely to reinvigorate such a comparison. Whether and how radicals should be confronted with victimization experiences of others is in need of further empirical clarification.

There is more optimism about the use of victimization narratives in preventing radicalization. This can also include collaboration between formers and victims. The interviewed experts highlight numerous times that narratives have a greater impact on youth at risk or the general public, and there are cases that show that impact is even greater when formers and victims tell their stories together. The extent formers and victims have an impact, however, does remain a matter of debate.

The Role of Culture in the Relationship Between Victimization and Deradicalization

Finally, there is the importance of narrative in culture. Much of the deradicalization work involves attempts to connect radicals to important figures outside the radical social movement. This is very much in line with what Hammack and Pilecki argue: “to see oneself as the same from one day to the next, but also to see oneself as engaged in a process that is the same as others.”⁵⁸

Experts see that formers are best placed to make, at least the initial, contact with radicals wanting to leave the group. The sharing of a similar past gives these formers a credibility allowing radicals to open up to them. This relationship needs to be based on mutual trust, openness and continuance for it to be successful. Formers can serve an important function, not only by what they say and the credence other radicals might attach to their tales, but also by their own example as a living counternarrative. Radicals are more likely to listen to these formers, which, in turn, allow the formers to help in re-interpreting their narrative, the negative events (such as victimization) and re-defining their identity.

It should be noted that although the relationship between culture, radicalization, and victimization was not discussed by the experts in the interviews, the above suggests at least an indirect relationship. Through culture—a strong and supportive network and getting help from someone with a similar past—can past victimization be reinterpreted and future victimization be prevented.

Concluding Remarks

This article aimed to uncover if there is a relationship between victimization and deradicalization and whether a narrative framework can enhance the understanding of victimological processes in deradicalization of political violence. The interviews with professionals indeed

confirmed a relation between victimization deradicalization, but this relationship is complex, making a straightforward interpretation difficult. The narrative framework offers a way of interpreting and further the understanding of this relation. Specifically, through identity, emotions, and culture this article has shown how victimization can directly or indirectly impact deradicalization. And while a first empirical exploration of the narrative framework in enhancing the understanding of deradicalization has been done, the authors hope that other scholars continue this journey, which can further enhance theories and best practices concerning deradicalization.

Notes

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28. The authors realize that within the proposed (narrative) framework interviewing practitioners has its disadvantages. Since life stories form an integral part of the narrative framework, the ideal situation is to collect life stories of radicals to understand the process of (de-)radicalization. However, talking to (former) radicals is not very easy. And as will become apparent in the results section, understanding the victimological processes that can lead to radicalization, is best to be first explored by interviewing practitioners. Many radicals do not see themselves as victims, making it difficult to explore whether a relationship between victimization and radicalization even exists. Since many of the practitioners that were interviewed work directly with radicals, they gave valuable insights into victimization and radicalization.
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