Rotten trees, bad apples? Understanding the intergenerational transmission of extremism

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CHAPTER 8

NARRATIVES OF PARENTHOOD

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INTRODUCTION

Narratives of parenthood constitute the third and final dimension that can affect the intergenerational transmission of extremism. In this Chapter, I use the term 'parenthood' in reference to the stories, assumptions, attitudes and general beliefs that underlie parenting choices. How do (former) extremist parents view themselves? What values are important to them in raising their children? And what do they think constitutes 'good' parenthood? These questions are addressed in this Chapter. The purpose is to gain more insight into the underlying rationale for the parenting practices and socialization mechanisms observed in the previous chapters. I will demonstrate that the intergenerational transmission of extremism is inextricably linked to these individual ideas and assumptions about parenthood, based on two considerations. On the one hand, parenthood constitutes an important topic in extremist ideologies, which inadvertently has an impact on extremist parent's approach to family life. On the other, parental attitudes regarding themselves and their offspring may indirectly influence children's susceptibility to extremist messaging – as we will see in this Chapter. So, while not all observations discussed in this Chapter are unique to extremist families per se, an analysis of extremists' narratives of parenthood can help us understand the core beliefs and attitudes that may influence processes of intergenerational transmission.

In this Chapter, I will draw on theories of parenting styles, based on the work of Diana Baumrind (1991). According to this framework, each parent has a distinct way of parenting, which can be categorized into four overarching types: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and neglectful parenting. Authoritative parents combine high demands with emotional involvement and affection. They value an open style of communication, set clear boundaries and provide emotional support to their children. Authoritarian parents, on the other hand, are strict and unresponsive: they enforce strict rules and require their children to conform and obey. Permissive parents are tolerant and accommodating. They provide are emotionally warm and supportive but have difficulty establishing and maintaining discipline. Parents with a permissive parenting style generally have little authority over their children. Neglectful parents are distant and show little involvement. They pay little attention to the emotional or physical needs of their children, and these are often left to their own devices (Baumrind, 1991; see also Estlein, 2016; Fadlillah & Fauziah, 2022)

The parenting styles employed by parents may affect the ways in and extent to which intergenerational transmission takes place. Authoritarian extremist parents may be able to transmit their hateful worldviews by emphasizing obedience and conformity. Authoritative parents, on the other hand, can promote a more open and inclusive attitude by providing space for discussion and dialogue. As with attachment styles, parenting styles can also indirectly influence the transmission of extremism: parents who have a warm relationship with their children, such as authoritative parents, might be able to help children to develop a sense of identity security and self-esteem

(Jadon & Tripathi, 2017; Pinquart & Gerke, 2019; Sharma & Pandey, 2015). This strengthens their emotional stability, which could in turn make them less susceptible to extremist messaging. At the same time, a lack of emotional support, such as with neglectful parents, may cause children to grow up anxious and unstable in their sense of self – which could increase the appeal of parents' extremist views.

It is against this backdrop that this Chapter will discuss the parenting styles and associated narratives that extremist parents adhere to in raising their children. I describe the beliefs and core assumptions that extremist parents have regarding parenthood; the role parenthood plays in extremist ideologies; and the ways in which (narratives of) parenthood may ultimately stimulate extremists' deradicalization process.

ATTITUDES OF PARENTHOOD

All of the interview respondents I spoke to expressed strong ideas about parenthood. In talking about their attitudes towards parenthood, they reflected on the norms and values that they consider to be important in raising their children upbringing. For obvious reasons, I am unable to check whether they truly live up to their own standards in practice. Nevertheless, a discussion of these beliefs can help us better understand the considerations and motivations underlying the socialization and parenting practices discussed in the previous chapters.

First, four of the (former) jihadist participants stress that they want their children to grow up happy. Karim, for example, tells me: "I would do my best to raise my children well and with dignity" (Interview Karim). When asked what "well" and "with dignity" mean to him, Karim says: "Just giving them all of your attention and love. So that they really feel they are loved. Never letting them down or telling them to "figure it out yourself". Really helping them, in any way you can" (Interview Karim). Soufiane, another (former) jihadist respondent, explains what he thinks he will be like as a father when he is released:

> "I think I'll be very relaxed as a father. And I think I'm really going to talk to my kids a lot. With patience. Because I don't want to praise myself or anything, but because of my life experiences, I know quite a bit about how the world works. (…) If I have children and they do things that I don't agree with, believe me, it is best to talk [to them] and not to instill fear in them, as many parents do" (Interview Soufiane)

Mustafa, another imprisoned interviewee, says he is not too concerned about the fatherhood that awaits him after serving sentence: "You simply cannot know what the future of your child will be like, or how your child will react to that. You may think, "I'm going to be such kind of father," but

what if that is the exact opposite of what your son or daughter needs?" he explains. "So, it will always be a matter of adapting. You can't have a plan for something that keep evolving. Every child needs its own approach (…) I am going to try to make [my daughter] happy, that is the only thing that is in my hands" (Interview Mustafa).

What stands out from the interviews, is that five (former) extremist parents demonstrate a deterministic worldview when it comes to the upbringing of their children. They believe that ultimately, they have little influence over their children's ideological development. For example, Vincent, a Dutch right-wing extremist father describes: "You are just born with these political beliefs. It's something you cannot teach. You either have that or you don't" (Interview Vincent). He therefore does not think that he will be able to convey his extremist ideas to his children. Time will tell whether they will end up sharing his worldview, he explains. While it is possible that interviewees desire to give socially desirable answers plays a role here, this deterministic narrative is reflected in the rest of the data as well. (Former) jihadist interviewee Mustafa, for example, explains that children naturally have a moral instinct. They do not need to be taught about 'right' or 'wrong': "Even if everyone in his family is a thief, a child knows that stealing is bad" (Interview Mustafa). According to Mustafa, a child can however hide this 'moral compass' if parents give him reason to do so: "So if he wants to make his parents proud, he might still decide to steal. And then you can't blame him for becoming a criminal. (…) But in the end, every child is naturally innocent" (Interview Mustafa).

Three (former) jihadist participants explicitly express that they find it important to raise their children in an environment of like-minded people. To them, this usually means that they do not want to stay in the Netherlands after their prison sentence. "I just feel how Muslims are treated here. I wouldn't want that for my children" one of them tells me. "I see the discrimination; I have experienced it myself. You just have less opportunities. In my opinion, this is not a good place to raise your children" (Interview Karim). Karim says he wants to raise his children "at least" in a country like Morocco– suggesting he would consider moving to an even stricter Islamic country. This illustrates that feelings of exclusion and the resulting desire to protect children from being ostracized, may cause give rise to parents' desire to exert authoritarian (social) control over children's lives. The ways in which such social control and isolation may contribute to processes of intergenerational transmission was discussed in Chapter 6.

AN EMPHASIS ON DISCIPLINE

Within the topic of parenthood, the topic of discipline emerged as a theme (observed in six interviews). Various former jihadist and right-wing extremist parents seem to find discipline and good manners important in the upbringing of their children. Although this is hardly a quality unique to extremist families, and even though these values may also be (at least to some degree) socio-culturally determined, this is nevertheless an important observation if we want to understand how

extremist parents raise their children. For example, an American son of a neo-Nazi father says that discipline was a core theme throughout his childhood:

> "Ultimately, my father's main goal was to discipline me. He had these ideas of what discipline should be like. He felt from a fairly young adult age that he didn't have the type of discipline that he found he should have had, and he blamed his parents for that. And therefore, I guess he felt like he didn't want to make the same mistake with me and my brother" (Interview Jeffrey)

British participant Madison also remembers her right-wing extremist mother attaching great importance to order and discipline within the home. "She was very strict, very strict with herself, very strict with others", she says. Madison was never allowed to sleep in, and she had to wash herself and get dressed immediately after waking up. Various (former) jihadist interviewees stress the importance of good manners, too. For example, Karim says that he will be a "lovingly strict" father – "because letting children go too much is not good, either". He illustrates this with the following anecdote:

> "I've always worked as a [profession]. So, I often would visit clients' homes. I once visited an older woman, a grandmother, who had her grandchild at home. A girl of about seven years old. She had just had breakfast and simply left her plate and cup on the table. So, this grandma asks her: "My dear" – she was just a really sweet lady – "would you mind putting your plate and cup in the sink?". That was all she asked. "Shut up grandma, you are not my mother." Well, that's what you get for being too nice" (Interview Karim)

Karim says he expected the grandmother in this case to give her grandchild a "corrective smack". "To me, that would have been a fairly normal response," he says. "But nowadays if you do that, you'll immediately have the Child Protection Service on your doorstep. I don't think that's right" (Interview Karim). Dutch participant William talks about the children of his jihadist brother and remembers that they, too, were raised in a very civilized manner. "They were very polite children, they always said 'please' and 'thank you', and [were] always well-mannered." According to the respondent in question, their mother was a "control freak" who in raising her children, wanted to do everything by the book (Interview William). She also thought it was very important that her children put effort in learning the Dutch language – and in the end they even talked "a bit posh". "But I think it would've been better if she'd toned it down a bit, the disciplining. Children should also be allowed to just be children" (Interview William). The mother of a (former) jihadist returnee sees this reflected in her grandchild. "[My daughter] wanted her son to be very well-mannered.

How you talk, how you act... those norms and values, you know. She finds that very important. She wanted them to be well-dressed, too".

The (former) jihadist participant Soufiane says that he also finds discipline important in raising his children. After all, he also learned this discipline himself while in IS territory, and later while in prison:

> "I want to do things differently from my own parents. I do not want to spoil [my children] or anything. If you want something, you will have to work for it. [My children] will need to be aware that nothing ever comes for free. I grew up here [in the Netherlands], as a spoiled boy, I could always buy everything, there is always money. But when you are there, in IS territory, it is a completely different life. Your mentality also changes. You need to be more considerate with how you spend your money, you will learn to make a budget and be aware of things. So in that sense I also benefited from it. I learned a discipline that I never learned here [in the Netherlands]. I would also use that discipline in my upbringing" (Interview Soufiane)

Later he says:

> "I just really want to teach my children that you can live with nothing and if you have something, appreciate it. And don't be like "gotta have, have, have". This also teaches your children to become resilient to advertisements and influences from bad people. Appreciate your environment, appreciate what you have" (Interview Soufiane)

The importance that (former) jihadist parents attach to discipline and good manners is also reflected in four of the Public Prosecutor's (PP) files and three court cases. A good example can be found in PP File 9, in which a radicalized father talks about a co-suspect whose parents used to be "tough". In confidential recordings, he also reflects on his own role as a father:

> "His father [of the co-suspect] is tough, but yeah, that's what we need to be. You see, our parents were tough too. I mean, there's no denying that. But yeah, that's how parents must treat [their children]. I also have children, and I also have to be tough on my children. We simply cannot deal with democracy and freedom." (…) "It would hurt our parents a lot if Morocco were to become a second Syria. But it surely wouldn't hurt me – in fact, I hope it will, you know? I hope it will" (PP File 9)

Interestingly, in this excerpt, the suspect reflects on the intergenerational transmission of this "tough" parenting style: his parents were hard on him, and so he must also be that way for his own children. At the same time, he also points out an intergenerational discontinuity. His parents would not want to see Morocco become a jihadist caliphate, but the suspect instead hopes it will. This suggests that the harsh parenting style he refers to is to be considered separately from his jihadist ambitions.

GENDER ROLES IN EXTREMIST PARENTING

Although in the data collection (topic lists and coding schemes) I did not focus on gender dynamics per se, the topic of (attitudes towards) gendered parenting inductively emerged from interviews and the Public Prosecutor's files nonetheless. The data indicates that in extremist families, parents often adhere to traditional gender role patterns (observed in eleven interviews, nine Public Prosecutor's (PP) Files, and eight court cases). Extremist households are not unique in this regard, and these observations may also be explained by socio-cultural factors. Nevertheless, examining this aspect may help us to understand the different ways in which mothers and fathers raise their respective daughter and sons. For example, within extremist movements, fathers are expected to provide for and protect their wives and children. Their involvement in an extremist organization is considered as their male duty. "A lot of men are motivated by this perception of 'I want the world to be safe for my wife and kids', or like: 'My children are losing their future and their security and they are like villainized and this is how I can protect them'" (Interview Abigail). Within right-wing extremist families, fathers appear to be generally more outspoken in their ideological viewpoints than mothers. A former right-wing extremist father explains:

> "You know, the [right-wing extremist] movement has this hyper-masculine vibe. If you smile it's like: 'Oh, look at this weirdo, he's over here smiling'. You know, happiness isn't something that you could really express. Sadness wasn't something you could express. It was all hyper-masculine, violent, war. You were either fighting or looking for women – that was the entirety of the movement" (Interview Michael)

Another participant similarly remembers the atmosphere in the right-wing extremist group he used to be a member of: "There was no respect, the guys in the movement were always very disrespectful towards women; women were there to be sex tools and nothing else. There was a lot of misogyny that went around in that group," he says (Interview Brendon). It is suggested that within these movements, women generally take on a more submissive and compliant role, and are not as ideologically invested as the men. As an American respondent who grew up in a right-wing extremist family says: "My mom was always just going along with my dad, it was, you know, she just did whatever he wanted. She did whatever to make the man happy" (Interview Brooke).

When it comes to jihadist communities, the gender dynamics appear to be different. A (former) jihadist respondent from Canada says:

> "In the jihadi scene, the women are stronger ideologues than the men. And my theory is that they are not burdened with the day-to-day of the ideology, like in the battlefield, in a violent context. You know, they don't have to worry about interpersonal problems with people or getting arrested or killed in a drone strike. The women are not in combat so they are kind of in a protective bubble and so that influence can be quite strong with women. And how that is passed on to the children, well, that is very easily done at that stage" (Interview Bilal)

Nevertheless, the case file analysis shows that fathers, too, can play an important role in raising children into their extremist worldviews (observed in three PP files and two court cases). For example, in Court Case 6, a stepfather turns out to be the main driving force behind the extremist ideas of his wife and (step)children. He taught his wife and children about his violent ideas, and eventually persuaded them to travel to IS territory (Court Case 6).

Three female interviewees indicate that within jihadist communities, the topic of motherhood pays a pivotal role. While in IS territory, they experienced a lot of pressure to have as many children as possible: "If you did not have children there, you'd be worthless as a woman", one of them says. "In the media they often say: 'You wanted to bear soldiers', but that was not the point at all. Motherhood is what determines a woman's value" (Interview Samira). Later in the conversation, Samira calls men "leaders" and women "weak", which further underlines this worldview. Likewise, in Court Case 6, a female suspect tells the police: "I don't know what the role of women in jihad is. [How I] see it myself is that you obey God and have children. Four of the Public Prosecutor's (PP) files similarly support the observation that many jihadist women regard motherhood as their highest goal. Moreover, it appears that jihadist men value a woman's fertility just as much. To illustrate, in PP File 11, a male suspect says that he wants to take his wife to Syria to have "twenty children" with her. Moreover, in PP File 12, a male suspect tells a friend that women should be first and foremost be mentally stable, and not "emotional and depressed", because that would obstruct them in taking care of the children. In the suspect's own words: "If the woman is stable, and if the children can fall back on the woman, there will be no issues" (PP File 12).

In the interviews, however, two of the (former) jihadist participants do subscribe to the idea that in a relationship, parents should be equal in their roles. "I think the most important thing is that as a man and a woman you just have respect for each other. It doesn't have to be that difficult", (former) jihadist detainee Karim says. He finds it strange that people nowadays tend to have everything formally arranged when it comes to running the household. "It will be like: I do this, you do that, I do this, you do that... Why would you do that? It can also be done in a

normal, respectful way, I think" (Interview Karim). To him, it ultimately comes down to partners being able to communicate with each other. "That's where things went wrong with my parents. Communication is the most important thing" (Interview Karim).

NARRATIVES OF PARENTHOOD AND JOINING ISLAMIC STATE

In coding the data, it appeared that for (former) jihadist parents, (attitudes towards and expectations of) parenthood tend to be related to their decision to travel to Islamic State territory. For example, being able to raise her children in "*Shaam*[8]" was a main motivator for the suspect in PP File 3 to travel to Syria. This also applies to the female suspects in other cases (PP File 2; PP File 8). "I was looking for love and the perfect family", one of them says during her police interrogation (PP File 8). These suspect's statements are supported by their social media messaging history, in which she expresses similar desires. Immediately after her departure, she wrote to her family: "I want to live under the laws of Islam. And I want my children to grow up with it" (PP File 8). The jihadist suspect in PP File 6 also hoped to start a family in Syria: "It was my dream to have a family of my own, as I've never had this" (PP File 6).

The way in which children grow up in IS territory seems attractive to radicalized parents. This becomes especially clear from PP File 7, in which chat conversations are described between a female suspect who has traveled to the 'caliphate', and a Dutch friend who remained in the Netherlands. The suspect writes to her friend about the children she sees while in IS territory. "[The children] all look like mini *mujahideen* here. Long hair… and the kids here are smacking *Dora*[9] when they see her on TV. *Wollah*, hahaha, as if they were seeing *kuffar*" (PP File 7). Her friend admits to being jealous and responds: "Oooh, stop it. If you were to see the children here… hahaha. All *kuffar* hairstyle and clothing from Israel. And they eat at the Mac [McDonalds] every day. And I'm not allowed to say anything about it, because they're not my children" (PP File 7). The friend sums up what she dislikes about raising her children in the West: "Laws of *kuffar*. Compulsory education. No *niqab* at school. (…) What you are telling me, is my fantasy… It seems too good to be true" (PP File 7). A Dutch interviewee talks in a similar way about their brother, who left for Islamic State territory with his family:

> "[My brother and his wife] were convinced that it would be best for the future of their children if they simply grew up as pure Muslims, not as unbelievers, but as pure Muslims, in a state where everyone is Muslim. Where everyone is some kind of perfect Muslim. It was really about that religious purity. That was self-evident, otherwise you wouldn't be going [to IS territory] with your children" (Interview William)

[8] Arabic for the Greater Syrian region – within jihadist communities often used in reference to the Islamic State 'caliphate'.

[9] Refers to *Dora the Explorer*, an American animated children's program that is also broadcast in the Netherlands.

The analysis of court rulings and Public Prosecutor's (PP) files also shows that the decision to travel to the so-called 'caliphate' and attitudes of parenthood are often interrelated (observed in six PP files and six court cases). To illustrate, Court Case 20 describes confidential police recordings in which a radicalized suspect and a friend watch an IS propaganda video. The suspect comments on the video, saying: "The children are simply being raised in the Islamic State, what more could you ask for?!", which further underscores the hypothesis that for many jihadist parents, raising children under sharia law would be the epitome of 'good' jihadi parenthood.

The analysis indicates that parenthood can also be indirectly linked to the desire to leave for IS territory. In PP File 8, for example, a jihadist couple fears that their children may be removed from their home due to their violent ideologies, which ultimately inspires their decision take their children to Syria instead. Former jihadist respondent William also says that his brother and his wife left for Syria and Iraq with their children, because they were scared that the Dutch authorities would come and take the children away. "They had a bit of a paranoid attitude, a profound distrust, that their children would be taken away," he says. "I think they were afraid that the authorities knew of their plans [to go to Syria], and that the intelligence service would be at their door to have their children taken away" (Interview William).

In a rare instance, however, parenthood itself can also function as a barrier in the pursuit of terrorist ambitions. William remembers that the Dutch jihadist group he was part of, explicitly looked down on family life. "There was a very strong group culture against marriage and so on," he remembers. "Getting married and starting a family was seen as an obstacle, because it would keep you from your religious duty to go on *jihad*", he explains (Interview William). He remembers that for men, settling down was considered a postponement of ideological obligations. These considerations changed when Islamic State came to power:

> "Before the arrival of the Islamic State, *jihad* was primarily a male affair. [Fathers] would leave their wives and children to go fight. But because of the Islamic State, *jihad* has really become a family affair, where you can settle down with your whole family and build a whole new life in the caliphate" (Interview William)

This does not mean, however, that all parents who traveled to IS territory did so to raise their children under sharia law. In Court Case 16 and Court Case 11, parents deliberately chose to leave their children in the Netherlands, and to not take them with them to the 'caliphate'. Although the exact motivation for this cannot be deduced from the court rulings, it is not unlikely that parents' desire to protect children from the physical dangers involved with life in the warzone played a role (see also Chapter 6, 'Absence of socialization efforts').

IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICTS IN PARENTHOOD

In analyzing the backgrounds of extremist families, it became clear that extremist partners sometimes do not see eye to eye with regard to their ideas about children's upbringing. In fact, based on the interview data, it appears that ideological conflicts between parents do not seem uncommon (observed in seven interviews). American interviewee Jeffrey remembers his mother wanting to sign him up for baseball as a child, but his right-wing extremist father prohibited this. "He was like: 'No, absolutely not, because there will be black kids there'" (Interview Jeffrey). Because his mother did not agree with these viewpoints, she made sure he could secretly still play baseball. Moreover, she tried to keep her husband from bringing the members of his neo-Nazi organization home. "Somehow, she was able to convince my dad to keep that part of his work – or whatever you want to call it – away from the family. She fought every single day to try to establish some sort of normalcy for me and my brother", he says (Interview Jeffrey). Jeffrey's mother also refuses to join his father's organization, much to his father's dismay. "My dad resented that tremendously. He absolutely resented that, and he held on to that resentment to the point where he finally met another woman, had an affair, and left my mom" (Interview Jeffrey).

Interviewee Benjamin, too, describes that the mother of his children was strongly against his neo-Nazi activities. "She didn't want me to get involved. She was heatedly against it. When I started taking my son to these rallies, she was like: I will give you an ultimatum, you either choose the [movement], or the children and me". Benjamin chose the latter – and in retrospect, he is very relieved that he did. I can't thank her enough. She is the reason I got out" (Interview Benjamin). Former right-wing extremist father Ethan says that his deradicalization process meant the end of his marriage (Interview Ethan). After all, his wife did not want to distance herself from the violent ideology, and eventually ended up remarrying another right-wing extremist man. For Ethan, the ideological conflict with his ex-wife puts a lot of strain on the co-parenting of their children:

> "For example, my eldest daughter just won a huge essay prize, with an essay that she wrote on Martin Luther King. But her mom and her new boyfriend – they totally destroyed her work. So, I was like: "Look what your daughter just achieved, look what she was able to do!". But even then, they were still knocking her down with their racism" (Interview Ethan)

Ethan explains he is afraid that his ex-wife will gain too much ideological control over his children. He therefore tries to remain involved in their lives as much as possible, and pushes back on their mother's extremist worldviews wherever he can. Nonetheless, the fear that his children will ultimately follow their mother's right-wing extremist footsteps, remains:

> "My eldest daughter, she's definitely vulnerable to being pushed over by [her mom]. She's often feeling like she doesn't want to hurt [her mom's] feelings, so she does what [her mom] says. And that's the part that worries me most… is that she eventually falls into this extremist ideology someday, just because she feels like she has to appease her mom, you know" (Interview Ethan)

The analysis of court rulings also indicates that children may suffer greatly from ideological conflicts between (radicalized) parents (observed in four court cases). In Court Case 6, parents have a different approach to the family ideology, which causes loyalty conflicts, anxiety and poor academic performance in their children. In addition, court cases suggest that parents may accuse each other of extremism, in light of a (pending) divorce. This is particularly evident in Court Case 10, 14 and 27. In these cases, one parent tries to convince authorities of another parents' extremist sentiments, in order to gain parental authority over their children. In reality, objective indications that these parents are indeed involved in extremist ideologies seem to be lacking, according to the courts. Regardless, the children in these cases often suffer a lot from these mutual accusations, leading to problematic behavior, attachment problems, and in some cases even parental alienation (Court Case 10; Court Case 14; Court Case 27).

Five of the Public Prosecutor's (PP) case files similarly show that in extremist families, ideological conflicts between parents are often present – especially in families where parents are divorced or separated. In the case files, it is often mentioned that suspects have a (former) partner who does not (fully) endorse their extremist views. The files suggest that this can cause tensions. In PP File 1, the partner of a radicalized suspect does not want to convert to Islam, which results in many heated discussions between parents. The radicalized suspect in PP File 1 no longer wants to touch his wife or sleep in the same bed with her, because as a disbeliever, the suspect considers her "unclean" (PP File 1). In PP File 10, a radicalized suspect – a Dutch convert – tells the authorities: "My ex was very negative about Islam. He really had an anti-Islam view (…) I am not allowed to see my daughter if I wear a headscarf… My ex hates Islam". Suspect's contact with her ex-husband deteriorates even further when she attempts to leave for Syria. "All ties with my family have been severed", the suspect says (PP File 10). It took a long time before her ex-partner allowed their daughter to come visit her in prison. "Eventually the Head of Security of [the municipality] (…) had to tell my ex that I should be allowed to see my daughter" (PP File 10).

Ideological differences between parents also play a role in other cases. In PP File 1, for example, a male suspect had his children circumcised abroad – against the wishes of their mother. In PP File 12, ideological differences are reflected parents' schooling choices: the radicalized father of the children wants them to go to an Islamic primary school, as he believes that the children should learn that in the Netherlands, they are allowed to practice their faith openly (PP File 12). The children's mother, however, does not agree, and would prefer to see the children go to a public primary school.

None of these conflicts are necessarily unique to extremist families – disagreements over head scarves, circumcisions, and school choices may also occur in 'mainstream' Muslim families. Nevertheless, the context that all suspects discussed in these case files were radicalized, justifies the relevance of these observations. It seems to support assumption that a parental divorce or separation can prevent the intergenerational transmission of extremism – provided that one of the parents can push back on the socialization mechanisms employed by the extremist parent (see Chapter 3). At the same time, an ideological conflict between parents can put children in a difficult position. After all, it is not inconceivable that the child in PP File 10 suffers psychologically from her mother's pro-IS ideology on the one hand, and her father's "anti-Islam views" (PP File 10) on the other. Moreover, if non-extremist parents use their custodial authority to limit children's contact with their ex-partner, this may ultimately even play into the romanticization of (absent) parents and their extremist ideologies (as observed in Chapter 6) – potentially stimulating the intergenerational transmission of extremism.

PARENTHOOD IN EXTREMIST IDEOLOGIES

The data suggests that the theme of ideological assumptions and (attitudes towards) parenthood are linked. Generally, it appears that parenthood constitutes an important topic within extremist ideologies, as interviews with (former) extremist participants reveal that within extremist movements, shared stories and narratives about the meaning of parenthood dictate members' family life (observed in twelve interviews). Several (former) right-wing extremist respondents note that extremist movements place great value on children as being "the future of the ideology", with parents needing to prepare them for the end of times. Michael, a US interviewee, says:

> "Within the organization, you hear the 14 words and it's like a battle cry. There is this fear that it drives into you. 'We must secure the existence of our race for the future of white children'. We must secure the existence of our race – in other words: your race is now in threat. It's in mortal jeopardy. And like in government, whenever you want to pass something, you say: "do it for the children". It is no different in extremist groups" (Interview Michael)

Another interviewee describes the emphasis his organization members placed on creating a new generation of Nazi soldiers. “There was all this talk about: ‘Your children must become white race warriors, blablabla’. Even then I already realized that this was problematic for a whole bunch of reasons. How could you teach your kids that stuff?” (Interview Damian). Ethan, also a former right-wing extremist father, says that this was an important topic of discussion for him and his (ex-)wife: “I can’t remember the specific conversations that we had, but I’m pretty sure we did talk about, like, ‘Hey, this is the next generation, we have to teach [our children] that the white race is in danger, they’re trying to delete us’” (Interview Ethan). Another even says that this future-generations-narrative inspired him to have a large family: “Well, the reason I had so many kids was you know, to replenish the ranks. Originally it was to… basically to bring up the next generation. That was part of it. That’s why in our movement a lot of the people have a lot of kids” (Interview Andrew).

In right-wing extremist movements, these narratives also apply to women (as observed in the section ‘Gender roles in parenthood’ of this Chapter). According to some, these narratives reveal the Christian roots of many right-wing extremist ideologies – where, for example, strong emphasis is placed on the role of ‘tradwives[10]’. “They just feel that it is their duty to raise white kids that are proud of their race,” says American interviewee Abigail says. “A lot of the messaging is around white families; preserving your white family and raising up your family to reject like the degeneracy of society and stuff like that” (Interview Abigail).

According to the Dutch former jihadist William, jihadism contains similar narratives about parenthood. “Within jihadi movements, a lot of emphasis is placed on children, because they see children as a blank slate that can still be shaped” (Interview William). Specifically, the perceived “purity” of children is often stressed, William explains – by organizations such as Islamic State in particular. “To them, children were the key to long-term survival: the education of a pure, pious generation that has known nothing but the Islamic State and can therefore continue the struggle as a morally pure generation” (Interview William). It is for this reason that the Islamic State has always given children a prominent place in their propaganda, a British former jihadist respondent explains (Interview Omar). And I reckon that messaging was particularly inspiring to jihadi parents – both those who stayed and those who ended up going to Syria” (Interview Omar).

DOUBLE STANDARDS IN PARENTHOOD

Regardless of the narratives on parenthood discussed in the previous section, the data demonstrates that extremist parents do not always practice what they preach (observed in seven interviews). Damian, a former right-wing extremist participant, says that in his opinion, many of the parents in his neo-Nazi organization were “hypocrites”:

[10] *Tradwives* (short for traditional wives) is a term used in right-wing radical and extremist environments to refer to women who uphold conservative norms, values and gender roles – and who thus denounce liberal feminism (or *libfem*). To right-wing extremist men, tradwives are generally considered the ‘ideal women’.

> "So many of these folks lead separate lives. They were supposed to be white supremacists but they were… They had a non-white partner and they would have a biracial child, and then they are saying 'I am a white supremacist' and I am going: I don't get this" (Interview Damian)

Interviews with other former right-wing extremists seems to support this viewpoint. For example, former right-wing extremist Andrew says that there is little consensus among right-wing extremists in what is and is not permitted in raising children. For example, during his time in the movement, his own children were allowed to play with non-white children, but romantic relationships were out of the question. Other parents, however, felt that any contact with bi-cultural children should be limited as much as possible. "There were a lot of hypocrisies, a lot of inconsistencies," he explains (Interview Andrew). He remembers that some extremist parents spoke very negatively about Mexican immigrants to their children, while simultaneously regularly taking them to Taco Bell. "So yeah, a lot of mental disconnects there" (Interview Andrew). Another interviewee: "We were going to live to these mythical Aryan ideals, but in reality, nobody did. (…) Women were placed on a pedestal for their wombs, but at the same time they treated their girlfriends like crap" (Interview Ethan).

Two other interview participants who grew up in right-wing extremist families seem to recognize these contradictions. They say that they experienced their upbringing as confusing, because of all the conflicting messaging (Interview Michael; Interview Jocelyn). To illustrate, Michael says that his parents continuously spoke negatively about Jewish people, despite the fact that a close relative turned out to be of Jewish descent. This caused cognitive dissonance at an early age, he says (Interview Michael). Another interviewee similarly explains that as a child, she had to perform a lot of "mental gymnastics" to reconcile her parents' extremist beliefs with their actual behavior (Interview Jocelyn).

This double standard is also observed by Dutch interviewee William. He describes the ways his (former) jihadist brother and his wife raised his children. "That upbringing was actually very contradictory. Very ambiguous" (Interview William). To exemplify, he recalls that his brother's children received a *Transformer* action figure as a birthday gift from their grandmother. The children's mother strongly objected to this present, because the action figure was carrying a gun. "[Their mother] was very upset: 'No, that is too violent, you can't give that to those children. That is not responsible'. Yet, a few months later, they take their children to Islamic State territory. How do you reconcile that?!" (Interview William).

DERADICALIZATION THROUGH PARENTHOOD

Finally, ten interviewees indicate that becoming a parent changed their worldviews. Damian, a former right-wing extremist father, says that he previously had a pessimistic approach to humanity, but with the arrival of his children, he started to see the good in people. This turned out to be the starting point of his deradicalization process:

> "As a parent, you just start to realize new things. (…) You start to think about the type of parent you want to be. What kind of life do I want for [my children]? I think success is them enjoying the world, happiness and things like that. None of the things within extremist groups are happiness. (…) You are just thinking about everything that you hate all the time" (Interview Damian)

US interviewee Ethan, also a former right-wing extremist father, talks about the role his children played in his disengagement and deradicalization:

> "The biggest factor was coming to the realization that, at the end of the day, it's my responsibility to be in my children's life. To be the father that they need; the right type of father. You know, letting go of those things and my history was important for my children" (Interview Ethan)

Other former extremist participants even describe their parenthood as a moment of "awakening". Ethan says that his whole body started to tingle when he held his newborn daughter for the first time. "I knew that I was instantly a different person. I can't describe it, but something definitely shifted. I just didn't know what" (Interview Ethan). US Interviewee Jocelyn also refers to her motherhood as a "catharsis". Another sees his children as a spiritual salvation: "My children saved my life. That may sound overly dramatic, but that is the way I look at it: they truly saved my life" (Interview Benjamin). It is not just biological parenthood that can have this effect on extremist parents. Former right-wing extremist interviewee Abigail says becoming a stepmom to her partner's children made her realize that the right-wing extremist way of life no longer suited her: "I was reading them like these books before bed and [I was] going out and playing with them. And I'm having this idea of 'I don't want them to do this shit, and have them end up like me'", she recalls. This sudden realization created an internal conflict. "The ideology was something that I thought was *so* right. I was willing to die for it. So why don't I want them to believe in it? I was really grappling with that" (Interview Abigail).

In addition, extremists' perception of themselves may change upon having a child:

> "Being a single dad became something of an identity for me. It made it easier to give up the identity of movement leader. Losing that identity was the hardest part, because it is not just what you believe, it is who you are, who you hang out with. For me it was what I read, what I watched, who I hung out with, my preoccupying thoughts most of the time. (…) That part of my identity had to be separated, and becoming a dad facilitated that" (Interview Ethan)

Five of the Public Prosecutor's (PP) files on (former) jihadist suspects also suggest that parenthood can have a deradicalizing effect. In PP File 6, a witness reflects on a jihadist female suspect: "I think [the suspect] her old self again now (…). Ever since she became pregnant, and now that she is a mother, she is her old self again. She now thinks first of her child or herself". The rest of the file supports these observations: "Since the birth of her son, [the suspect] wanted to return to the Netherlands. She realized that she could not raise a child in Syria" (PP File 6). In PP File 8, a female suspect explains to the police why she is happy that she was able to take her children out of Syria:

> "What I was concerned about was: how should I deal with this in the longer term? Because back then, [my daughter] was still young, but they were slowly getting older, you know? But thank God I was able to get my children out of there before they became aware of anything" (PP File 8)

In this file, a witness tells the police that he expects the suspect to simply resume her everyday life in the Netherlands: "Look, she also has her parents here. She grew up in the Netherlands. I think she is just a normal girl, and when she is reunited with her children, she will start living her normal family life again" (PP File 8). Similarly, Irene – mother of a (former) jihadist daughter – says: "The birth of her son was really the most important reason for wanting to leave [IS territory]" (Interview Irene). While in the 'caliphate', her daughter hoped she would have a baby girl – because a boy would have been taken away by Islamic State to be raised a fighter. "And that was absolutely not something she [her daughter] wanted to happen", Irene says. Another suspect says in his police interview that having children slowed down his radicalization process. He says he was interested in Islamic State until a few years ago. "But then I started to cut down on those IS things. I was working a lot, I started a family, and so on," the suspect says (PP File 9). The reliability of this statement is questionable, given that the suspect was ultimately convicted of terrorist crimes. Nevertheless, confidential police recordings in PP File 12 also suggest that settling down and starting a family can be an obstacle to committing extremist violence. In this case, a jihadist suspect refers to men with

families as "weaklings" who are unable to "snatch *kuffar* [infidels]" (PP File 12). In conversation with a friend, he expands on these viewpoints:

> "When you have children, you always keep thinking about them: what is going to happen to them, etcetera? That is an automatism. So, when you want to do something [violent], you will have to think ten times more about it, than when you don't have [a family]. Then you're just on your own. But otherwise, you will have to consider ten times more: Am I going to do that? [What is the] disadvantage of this or that?" (PP File 12)

This fits with the observations described in the section 'Parenthood in IS territory' earlier in this Chapter, which demonstrated that parenthood can indeed be an obstacle to undertaking jihad. It endorses the hypothesis that becoming a parent may not only cause one's sense of self to shift, but could even inhibit (involvement in) extremist activities on a more practical level.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

This Chapter aimed to shed light on parenthood as the third and final dimension of the intergenerational transmission of extremism. By examining interviews, files and court rulings, I was able to study the parenting styles and attitudes of extremist parents, including the ways in which extremist parents view themselves, their offspring, and their respective parent-child relationship. For example, I described how (former) right-wing extremist and jihadist parents have diverse ideas about the meaning of "good" parenting – with differing perceptions of their degree of influence on and responsibility for the development of their offspring. Nevertheless, it turned out that most respondents and cases pointed to the importance of discipline and politeness as central values in parenting. This suggests that both right-wing extremist and jihadist parents may tend towards an authoritarian parenting style, in which discipline and order play an important role.

The study of extremist parenting cannot be separated from the element of gender. In both jihadist and right-wing extremist environments, women are put on a pedestal because of their fertility. This fertility is an inherent part of mothers' extremist ambitions: giving birth to a new generation of extremists is an individual and collective duty for them, our research shows. This certainly seems to be the case for women who have traveled to IS territory, for whom parenthood, and specifically motherhood, appears to be a fundamentally ideological task. This is in line with extremist narratives in which only having children can guarantee the survival of the ideology. For men, parenthood is less central to their violent ambitions: they fulfill their role as extremist fighters mainly within the organization of which they are a member, and to a lesser extent as heads of families.

Nevertheless, I demonstrated that in extremist families there can be considerable conflicts between the theory and the practice of extremist parenthood. Extremist narratives about raising children do not always appear to be adhered to in real life, and double standards among parents do not seem to be unusual, especially in right-wing extremist circles. This fits with the observations from the Chapter 6 on Socialization Mechanisms: although the extremist ideology instructs parents to raise a new generation of fighters, it became apparent that parents regularly choose not to raise their children with these ideas. Ideological conflicts in parenting, where fathers and mothers do not view extremist ideas in the same way, probably also inhibit the intergenerational transmission of these ideas.

Finally, in this Chapter I described how parenthood may inspire processes of disengagement and deradicalization. The data shows that for extremist individuals, having a child can be a life-changing experience. On the one hand, parenthood can give rise to a renewed self-image: where extremist parents previously saw themselves as angry and hateful, having a child can result in them discovering a new (softer, more caring) side of themselves. Through parenthood extremist individuals may learn to take responsibility for something greater than themselves and their ideologies. On the other hand, parenthood can also cause a profound shift in extremists individuals' worldviews: being confronted with the purity and vulnerability of a baby can show them that one is not born with hateful ideas. Such attitudes are socially learned – and as such, they can also be *unlearned*. I will discuss these considerations more in-depth in the final Chapter 'Aftermath'. I will consider how parents' extremism can have a lasting impact on households, both for children growing up in these families, and for parents themselves. Moreover, I will discuss how interviewees managed to come to terms with their ideological backgrounds, and the steps they had to take to reconcile with their extremist childhood and/or parenthood.