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

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CHAPTER 9

AFTERMATH

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INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapters, I discussed how the intergenerational transmission of extremism can manifest itself in three separate dimensions (those being socialization mechanisms, parenting practices, and narratives of parenthood). Nonetheless, the story does not end when children are grown-up and move out of the family home. As I have come to understand, both parents and children may continue to struggle with coming to terms with their extremist family history – sometimes even long after undergoing a process of deradicalization. How do adult children cope with their extremist upbringing, and what is their relation with their parents like today? How do parents themselves look back on the choices that they made in raising their children, after their extremist days are behind them? These questions are central to this Chapter.

Earlier in this dissertation, in Chapter 3, it was already observed that (adult) children who grew up with extremist parents can deal with their upbringing in different ways. While some continue to embrace their parents' violent ideologies, others may ultimately break away from it. Almost all participants I spoke to who grew up in an extremist family, fall into this latter category. This certainly reflects an important limitation of the recruitment strategy that was employed: individuals who did not distance themselves from their parents' beliefs proved difficult to approach and were generally not interested in participating in our research project. Nevertheless, the interviews, files and court cases can teach us a lot about the ways in which some people manage to turn their lives around. In this Chapter, I will describe the long-term consequences of an extremist upbringing, and the impact their family ideology still has on some former extremists today. I will reflect on the negative reactions they receive from their social environments; the course of their deradicalization process; the role that trauma plays in breaking away from extremist family backgrounds; and the way their childhood influences their own parenthood. Finally, I present some stories of (former) extremist parents; discuss the ways they look back on their past lives as extremists; and the ways they discuss their family background with their children.

LABELING AND STIGMATIZATION

From the interview data it becomes clear that extremist families often have to deal with negative reactions from their (non-extremist) social surroundings (observed in twelve interviews). "For my children… Yes, of course, people know. And they sometimes ask questions", right-wing extremist father Vincent says. "But look, I'm their dad, so [my kids] can always say, 'You don't like it? Talk to my father instead. He will give you your answers" (Interview Vincent). Other interviewees also feel that their children are being held responsible for their parents' beliefs and behavior. "My kids have had people say stuff to them. (…) Like, 'How could your dad have done anything like that?'", a former right-wing extremist father says (Interview Ethan). Madison, a former extremist mother from the United Kingdom recalls that the kids at school called her daughter names like "Hitler's granddaughter".

The data furthermore shows that such experiences of labeling and stigmatization can have a profound impact on children. For example, a respondent who grew up in a right-wing extremist environment says that many neighbors looked down on her because of her father's views. "It caused me to have a horrible school experience. Horrible. I was ostracized big time", she says. "When I was a teenage girl, all the locals were like "Well, there's your father… So, the apple must not fall far from the tree". That kind of thing" (Interview Brooke). Another respondent from the United Kingdom indicates that to her, the negative way the outside world reacted to her parents' right-wing extremist worldviews, was more traumatizing than the upbringing itself (Interview Jocelyn).

In a jihadist context, labeling and stigmatization is similarly experienced. Interviewee Irene looks after her toddler grandchild who was born in IS territory. When she decides to sign her grandchild up for judo, her friends and family act surprised. "A relative of mine responded: 'Well, he grew up in such an aggressive area already, and now you are going to make him even more aggressive'. And then I thought to myself: 'Oh shit, do people actually think that?'" (Interview Irene). A (former) jihadist detainee says that her children did not receive any negative reactions to their family background so far. She does however fear for the future:

> "At the moment my children are not affected by [our history]. But I do think that this could happen. Most people don't know our story. The school simply told the children: 'Their mother and father moved to Syria, but they came back to the Netherlands and the mother will not be there for a while'. Of course, the teachers understand what this means – they'll put two and two together – but the children are not really concerned with it" (Interview Nour)

Nour says she is afraid that her children may still have to deal with social stigmas as they grow older. Media reporting on foreign fighters, and the ways in which mothers and children who have returned from the warzone are being portrayed, may contribute to this stigmatization, she says (Interview Nour).

TRAUMA AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Several of the adult interviewees who were raised by extremist parents describe still struggling with trauma or other mental health issues following their childhood (Interview Jeffrey; Interview Brooke; Interview Liam; Interview Jocelyn; Interview Michael; Interview Abigail). Four of them say they have difficulty trusting others because parents have taught them to be naturally suspicious of the outside world. For example, a US interviewee from a right-wing extremist background says: "I've always been someone to keep to himself because I learned at an early age not to trust people.

People hurt you; or they want something from you. (…) And I grew up with this, so I was always happy being alone" (Interview Liam).

Three interviewees indicate that they struggle with poor communication skills due to their isolated upbringing. Abigail, an American woman from a right-wing extremist background says: "I never learned any social skills, like, how to express what I'm feeling" (Interview Abigail). Another respondent describes:

> "Because I grew up so socially isolated, I used to believe that there was something horribly wrong with me. Up until a few years ago, I couldn't even look another adult in the eye and hold their gaze. I thought they would see right through me and see how worthless I was. I just wanted to hide, you know. It caused me severe problems in my personal life and my professional life" (Interview Jeffrey)

One of the interviewees indicates she experiences psychosomatic pain because of her childhood. "I was exposed to chronic traumatic stress for such a long period of time. And I survived it somehow, mentally. But physically, it kind of burned me down", a daughter of right-wing extremist parents says (Interview Brooke). She explains she still suffers from chronic metabolic and hormonal problems due to her upbringing. In another case, the current political climate is reactivating a participant's trauma. Jeffrey, an American respondent says: "When I saw what happened in Charlottesville in 2017… That just immediately took me back to my childhood" (Interview Jeffrey). Brooke, who also grew up in a right-wing extremist family, says that she had a similar experience during Donald Trump's presidential election in 2016: "That was a real blow to my PTSD anxiety, I mean Trump as president and the way he emboldened the voice of the hateful people…. That was really horrifying for me because of my experiences" (Interview Brooke). COVID-restrictions also brought her back to her family history. "I was isolated and left alone for so long; being in lockdown just felt like a natural thing" (Interview Brooke).

Children raised by (former) jihadist parents may also suffer from trauma. Since I primarily interviewed participants who raised their children in IS territory, these traumas often have to do with their experiences in the warzone. For example, Dutch interviewee William talks about his brother's children, who were taken to Syria by their parents. "They have experienced all kinds of bombings. Their neighbors' house was hit, everyone was buried there under the rubble", he says. "And later they experienced another attack, with phosphorus and such, and all those burning corpses were there. Their children also saw that" (Interview William). William is therefore rather skeptical about his nephews' and nieces' resocialization possibilities. "I think by now, they reached an age where they can no longer be reintegrated. Especially the oldest children, they only ever experienced war and violence. They simply grew up with Islamic State" (Interview William).

The case file analysis demonstrates that children who were raised in IS territory might suffer from anxiety, attachment issues, problematic behavior, anger outbursts, chronic stress and insecurities (e.g. (Court Case 18; Court Case 19; Court Case 23; PP File 3; PP File 8). During a police interrogation, a female suspect explains how difficult her daughter found their time in Syria:

> "I didn't expect [my daughter] to find it so intense. Uhm, I could see it having an effect on her, Syria. For example, she started peeing in her diaper and her pants again, and so on. And she was afraid of the other children, because the children there [in Syria] were quite aggressive" (PP File 8)

Dutch interviewee Irene, who provides foster care to a child who was raised in IS territory, says that she notices signs of trauma in her foster son, too. For example, Irene recalls that her foster son did not want to take off his shoes before going to sleep "because he lost his shoes while fleeing [from IS territory]" (Interview Irene). When they come across a military convoy, the boy clearly recognizes the tanks from when he was still in the warzone: "He said: 'They can really shoot! They really shot at us!'" (Interview Irene). Abdelkader, an imprisoned (former) jihadist, believes that his children are also traumatized by their time spent in IS territory:

> "Absolutely, they have seen too much. I'm not going to lie about that. Those are adult things and they're children. Of course, you try to live [in IS territory] in a place that is as safe as possible, where the risk of violence is the lowest, but yes. As an adult you can put things into perspective, but children cannot put it into perspective at all. And if you have to tell them: 'Your friend is no longer there', or 'Your school was bombed'… I instead told them that [their friends] had moved, or that they were going to a new school because their old school was closed down, or broken or something like that. You just try to live as normally as possible. They did not choose it, but it still becomes their reality. Children themselves can also be resilient. But maybe later when they get older, when they are adults, or when they enter puberty, it will become clear what impact it has had on them. And of course, you don't know whether they will blame you for that" (Interview Abdelkader)

Not all (former) jihadist parents believe that their children were traumatized by their experiences in IS territory. One (former) jihadist detainee recalls that during a play therapy session, her son had to recreate the Kurdish detention camp where they stayed prior to their return to the Netherlands.

> "The play therapist asked 'What is this?' and then [my son] said: 'These are the camp soldiers who were guarding us, they are there to protect us and to keep the lights on'. But that was just his own interpretation. Those soldiers were not there to protect us at all; they were there to make sure that we would not escape. And they had nothing to do with the lights. But of course, children can have a completely different experience" (Interview Nour)

In PP File 3, a (former) jihadist mother also says that her son visibly enjoyed the time they spent in IS territory, and later in the Kurdish detention camp. "He thought it was a campsite", she says during her police interrogation. To pass the time, the mother played with her son a lot, and tried to school him whenever possible. She explains to the police that her son can sometimes behave disrespectfully, which she says is "typically Syrian". "He has been through a lot. When he hears a bomb, he'll laugh, he doesn't experience stress at all. Only now is he experiencing stress, now that we are away from IS", she says in her official report (PP File 3). Her daughter was also not afraid of the bombings, and she too would laugh about it, according to the mother. "She would say: 'Look, mom, how much smoke there is!'". The truthfulness of these statements cannot be verified based on the analysis. Moreover, suspect's claims about children laughing at bombs is not supported in other files. PP File 6 even paints a vastly different picture. "I experienced bombings [in Syria], and then I just saw those children screaming and running away", the suspect in this file says.

The court cases indicate that it is difficult for judicial authorities, foster parents, and child care institutions to gain insight into the traumas of children who were raised in IS territory. In four of these cases, judicial authorities suggest that children "possibly" suffer from trauma – or indicate that this possibility "should be taken into account", but that it is "unclear" to what extent this is actually the case (Court Case 23; Court Case 24; Court Case 25; Court Case 26). Nevertheless, various parties note that children of returnees generally "do well" after arriving in the Netherlands (e.g. Court Case 23; Court Case 25; Court Case 26). For example, in Court Case 26 it is mentioned that the daughter of a jihadist mother has shown "great development" following her return from Syria (Court Case 26). In another case file involving a detained mother, a child protection agency writes: "The children were observed in the foster family by care professionals. They develop positively and do well at school" (Court Case 25). According to the file, the children in Court Case 25 speak Dutch fluently, and do not show any indications of attachment issues or behavioral problems. Although it remains to be seen how the children discussed in these cases will develop overtime, these observations suggest that children of returnees do not necessarily struggle to resocialize and reintegrate into Dutch society – and that the effects of trauma may thus be limited.

DERADICALIZATION AND BREAKING AWAY

Almost all right-wing extremist participants I spoke to have – at least partially – distanced themselves from their parents' ideas. Specific trigger events appear to play an important role in that process. For example, Liam, an American former right-wing extremist interviewee, says that he started experiencing cognitive dissonance when he unexpectedly fell in love with a black woman. "On the one side I was becoming more and more involved in this Nazi movement – as a renown, well-saluted, well-respected SS officer. (…) Yet at the same time, I was also falling for this black woman", he says (Interview Liam). Being confronted with the racism that his wife has to endure, ultimately turns out to be the first step in his deradicalization process. For Ethan, also a former right-wing extremist, a criminal conviction caused him to break away from his extremist family background. "I had this judge, who was a Jewish man, who was very supportive of me. He didn't believe I was the man he saw in front of him. He truly believed that I could change" (Interview Ethan). While in detention, Ethan befriended a black cellmate – with whom he turned out to have more in common than he ever could have imagined. "At first, I didn't want to have anything to with him. But once we started talking, we really opened up, and just talked and talked about our lives. (…) It really opened my eyes" (Interview Ethan).

Religion can also play an important role in processes of breaking away (observed in seven interviews). One of the interviewees said that after a big health scare, he came into contact with a priest for the first time, after which he began to delve deeper into the Christian religion. His faith eventually took the place of the right-wing extremist ideology that he has followed since childhood (Interview Liam). Abigail, another right-wing extremist interviewee, also found salvation in Christianity, after she broke away from her right-wing extremist roots. "I suddenly became very, very traditionally Christian," she says. "But it actually took me a while before I realized: 'Oh, this is actually the same old stuff, all over again'. I just wanted rules to follow, and to have an explanation for why the world is a dangerous place" (Interview Abigail).

Interviewee Michael, who comes from a right-wing extremist background, says that a DNA test changed his view of the world. Upon taking the test, he expected to see the alleged German roots of his ancestors confirmed. However, to his surprise, it turned out to indicate a Jewish background. "It changed everything", he summarizes (Interview Michael). After the initial shock, Michael decides to fully embrace his roots and converts to Judaism. For him too, his religion ultimately took the place of his right-wing extremist ideology. Moreover, former right-wing extremist respondents Brooke and Ethan say that Eastern religions helped them to break free from their parents' ideas. "I didn't realize how much of this [right-wing extremist] ideology was entangled with all this Christian-identity stuff, until I started reading about other religions", the latter says (Interview Ethan). Buddhism specifically taught Ethan to look at the world in a different – "a less negative, less toxic" – way, he explains. This is also the case for Brooke, who found support in Buddhism and Hinduism during her deradicalization process. She left her Christian background

behind at the same time as her right-wing extremist upbringing. “I just felt like Christianity had been so misused in my life. I was astounded by how religion was used to cover-up the most gruesome acts of violence, so I just couldn’t hold onto that anymore” (Interview Brooke).

For other interviewees, this process of breaking away is often accompanied by education and self-study (observed in four interviews). For example, American respondent Jeffrey says that he independently started to study the Second World War. As such, he discovered that the Holocaust – which his parents had always denied – did in fact take place (Interview Jeffrey). He ultimately decides to visit the concentration camp in Dachau, as to find a symbolic closure to his parents’ extremist views. UK interviewee Jocelyn, the daughter of right-wing extremist parents, says that her deradicalization process involved reading various historical books and diving into archival materials, to better understand her family history (Interview Jocelyn).

Yet, the interviews suggest that the breaking away from an extremist upbringing is often a continuous, long-term process. Five of the interview participants describe that to this day, they still have to remain aware not to fall back on the worldviews they were taught as a child: “Even today, I have to check myself every now and then. I have to be like: ‘No wait, I don’t wanna go there again’. Because that way of thinking is just so deeply engrained in my system, you know. At a cellular level almost” (Interview Jeffrey). British interviewee Jocelyn similarly summarizes: “The process is never truly finished”. This observation fits with insights from life course criminology, which suggest that desistance (Laub & Sampson, 2001) is not a one-time decision, but a choice that has to be made again and again (Warr, 2017).

CUTTING TIES OR CONTINUING CONTACT

Six of the former right-wing extremist interviewees indicate that to them, cutting ties with extremist family members was an essential step in their recovery process (Interview Charlotte; Interview Brooke; Interview Liam; Interview Damian; Interview Ethan; Interview Benjamin). “I had to cut ties, I just had to. It’s similar to drug addicts and alcoholics: you can’t heal in the environment that made you sick in the first place”, one of them said (Interview Brooke). Another participant says: “I cut my dad’s side of the family out completely. I only have one uncle that I talk to from that side of the family. But even still, our politics don’t line up anymore” (Interview Ethan). Charlotte, an interviewee from the United States, says that she chose to not only cut off all contact with her right-wing extremist parents, but also with her brother and sister. She fears that otherwise, her parents could try to reach out to her through her siblings. “I was terrified of the idea that [my siblings] might let my parents around my kids if I ever asked them to babysit”, she explains (Interview Charlotte). American interviewee Brooke similarly indicates that to her, the main reason to cut ties with her right-wing extremist father was to shield her children from his violent ideas.

Three interviewees coming from a right-wing extremist background indicate that their social environment responded very negatively to them breaking away. From their stories it appears that extended family members and family friends in particular found it difficult to come to terms with their decision. For example, American participant Brooke says that right-wing extremist family members started calling her a "race traitor" when she decided to cut ties with them. Furthermore, interviewee Jeffrey remembers that friends of his right-wing extremist father tried to slander him because he spoke out against his father's violent actions. They ultimately even started threatening him via social media, claiming to revenge his perceived betrayal (Interview Jeffrey).

Regardless, not all interviewees decided to cut ties with their extremist parents. Five interview participants indicate that even today, their parents still play an important role in their lives. Even though they distanced themselves from their parents' ideologies, they continue to support and sometimes even defend their extremist parents. From these conversations it can be observed that several interviewees appeal to some level of moral disengagement (see Bandura, 2002): in order to come to terms with their parents' hateful ideas and behaviors, participants may mentally downplay or soften their involvement in the extremist movement. This allows them to accept the facts of their family history, without having to consider their parents "bad" people. This is evident, for example, from interviewees' use of euphemisms when talking about their upbringing. The daughter of a right-wing extremist neo-Nazi leader says that her father's violent actions were "unpopular", but emphasized that he did not act out of bad intentions (Interview Jocelyn). Another participant calls her Nazi grandfather a "romantic" who fell in love with the idea of the Greater Germanic Empire. "I don't think he was necessarily hateful", she explains. According to Madison, her grandfather was not a bad man per se, as his choices stemmed from a certain "blindness" to the bigger picture (Interview Madison). Other interviewees, too, speak very positively about their extremist (grand)parents, and sometimes verbally put them on a pedestal. American interviewee Jeffrey refers to the memoirs of his right-wing extremist father as "The Bible of the racist right", and calls his father's organization "one of the most prominent hate groups in the entire world" (Interview Jeffrey). He also describes his father himself with several euphemistic terms – calling him "the most dangerous man in the US" and "an extremely intelligent man" (Interview Jeffrey). These observations suggest that, despite his deradicalization process, Jeffrey still takes a lot of pride in his father's extremist "achievements" and the status he acquired in right-wing extremist circles. It also reflects children's unconditional loyalty discussed in Chapter 6 – suggesting that these feelings are not limited to childhood, but may be carried on well into adulthood.

Jeffrey's case is remarkable because his twin brother – who was raised in the same right-wing extremist household as him – has a completely different stance towards their parents. Jeffrey's twin brother decided at an early age that he no longer wanted to stay in touch with his extremist father, while Jeffrey continued for years to try to build a relationship with his dad. "My brother grew to hate my father", Jeffrey says. "When my father passed away, I asked [my brother]

to go to the memorial service together. But he was like: 'No way, good riddance. I'm glad he's dead'. But I personally never felt that way" (Interview Jeffrey). While Jeffrey cannot explain their opposing viewpoints, he thinks that he and his brother both experienced their childhood very differently. Where Jeffrey as a child continuously tried to gain his father's approval, his brother early on decided to look for support and acknowledgement outside of the family home.

This shows that different children from the same extremist family can deal with their childhood in different ways. While some cut off all contact (either in order to focus on their deradicalization process and emotional recovery, or out of spite and disappointment), others continue to support their parents even into adulthood. For the latter group, some level of moral disengagement appears to be necessary in order to disconnect their parents from their hateful ideologies.

EFFECTS ON PARENTHOOD

From the data it becomes clear that some of the (adult) children who were raised in an extremist household later struggle with their own role as parents (observed in six interviews). For example, interviewee Abigail says that she twice decided to give up her newborn baby for adoption, because she believed that her right-wing extremist history would inhibit her from being a good mother. "I was like, I am going to ruin this human being, for sure" (Interview Abigail). Jeffrey, another participant from a right-wing extremist background, says that for years, he also did not want to have children because of similar reasons. Jeffrey was afraid of passing on his parents' hateful genes to his children, and he too was convinced that he could never be a good father because of his family history. Ultimately, Jeffrey and his wife decided to adopt. "When we finally came up with the idea of adoption, I insisted on having girls. I was afraid that if I had a son, I would somehow end up treating my son the way my dad treated me" (Interview Jeffrey).

Brooke, an American respondent from a right-wing extremist family, also opted for adoption. That choice was a "pure spiritual calling", she explains (Interview Brooke). Brooke ultimately decided to adopt a bi-cultural child, in the hope of permanently distancing herself from the right-wing extremist ideas of her parents – and in hope of putting things somewhat "right", she adds (Interview Brooke). US interviewee Abigail says that she feels obliged to raise her children in a completely hate-free and violence-free world. "I have a life-long commitment to making amendments", Abigail says. Others similarly view their parenthood as an opportunity to offer children something they themselves never had. For example, the former right-wing extremist Liam says that he is very happy that he can provide his children with a "normal, healthy" upbringing. "That's something that I never knew. And I'm so happy to see that we can provide that [to our children], really" (Interview Liam). Brooke, who also grew up in a right-wing extremist family, says:

> "As far as parenting goes, it was a very, very important thing to not do any of the things that [my father] had done. Being a mother is the most important role of my life. Because I was determined to make my children's lives better. To leave these generation-old, traumatic curses behind and make our own legacy, you know" (Interview Brooke)

This further illustrates the dedication of (former) right-wing extremist respondents to do better than their own parents. These observations are not reflected in interviews with (former) jihadist participants, which can (at least partly) be explained by the fact that I did not interview many (former) jihadists who themselves were raised in an extremist household.

Regret and shame

Four former extremist parents say they regret the decisions they made in raising their children. "My whole past is a regret", one of them summarizes (Interview Michael). Michael describes that his eldest son recently came out as gay – yet he was hesitant to do so, because of his parents' neo-Nazi past. Michael's son was afraid that his parents would react negatively:

> "I was very supportive [of his coming out], of course. But had I still been in the movement at that time, I most certainly would have lost my mind. I probably would have flipped out and would have told him: 'No, you just don't understand, you're indoctrinated by the Zionist occupational government'. I would have literally thought: 'Oh my god, the media grabbed the whole of my son's mind'. It would have been horrible. It would have mentally scared him in ways that are almost irreparable. That is very sad to think about" (Interview Michael)

Ethan, another former right-wing extremist respondent, says that he too has felt a lot of shame about his past:

> "There was a lot of shame. For the longest time, I couldn't even go to the beach with [my children] because I had a swastika tattoo on my arm. It's covered up now. But I was afraid to even go to the beach, take my shirt off or do anything with my children because of the shame" (Interview Ethan)

Ethan recalls that in the past, he would post photos of his children in neo-Nazi costumes on social media. These memories invoke a lot of shame. "I look back and feel like… Why would I have ever

done that to my children? It might be part of your whole life, but it's not part of theirs" (Interview Ethan). Yet, Ethan views his shame as something positive: "It is all healthy shame. You know, healthy shame is 'I did bad. I did wrong', toxic shame is 'I am bad. I am wrong'. And I think toxic shame is at the root of it all", he explains. "That feeling of being less-than, not powerful, unlovable… it's at the root of all the hate. Healthy shame, on the other hand, means you are willing to heal, willing to be better" (Interview Ethan).

Regret and shame are less prominent topics in interviews with (former) jihadist participants. This may again be because many of the (former) jihadist parents I interviewed are in prison, and thus have only limited contact with their children and partners. Therefore, the effects their ideology may have on their children is perhaps not as visible to them. In addition, feelings of regret and shame can be subconsciously avoided, so as not to have to see the consequences of one's own actions. This is also related to the powerlessness many of the detained interviewees reported with regards to their children (see Chapter 7). Their reported (physical and emotional) distance to their families may make it harder for parents in prison to accept that their mistakes may have caused their children harm. For example, one of the (former) jihadist interviewees says:

> "Regret is always a bit difficult to say. I think people should make their own choices. And yes, when it comes to my children or something... Of course, it's never fun to hurt them, but yes. Look, ultimately you have that freedom to make mistakes, to make choices. I have three children of my own. I would not judge my children for certain choices they make. I just wish they would get behind it. (…) So, I think guilt or something… that doesn't help you. I think I am responsible for how I feel" (Interview Abdelkader)

This quotation illustrates a moral disconnect: employing a highly individualistic narrative, the consequences of one's own actions are separated from their social context – and thus downplayed (and thereby exhibiting the moral disengagement and neutralization techniques in Chapter 2 of this dissertation). Although Abdelkader seems to acknowledge his actions may have caused his children harm, he does not take responsibility for this, claiming he "has the freedom to make mistakes" (Interview Abdelkader).

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE

Eight of the former extremist parents I spoke to indicated that at some point they had to openly talk to their children about their extremist family history. "At some point I was like: 'I'm well-known, I'm well-hated by certain people… We're gonna have to talk'. And I sort of laid it all out for my kids", former right-wing extremist interviewee Michael says. This transparency is important, Michael

explains, since otherwise, children may hear about their parents' history through the grapevine. "I wanted to help them understand what I believed, and why", Michael says. US interviewee Abigail tells in a similar way how she informed her children of her former ideology: "I never wanted my kids to accidentally discover, like, 'your mom was a Nazi' or whatever. So, I made a choice to be very open and honest with them".

To Ethan, a former right-wing extremist respondent from the United States, hiding his extremist past from his children was out of the question: "I mean, they were getting older, and if you Google my name… It's pretty self-evident", he says. "I just wanted them to hear about it from me" (Interview Ethan). Ethan fears that his children could be susceptible to the messaging of new right-wing extremist movements, such as the Proud Boys, due to their parents' extremist history. "It worries me, that [my children] may feel themselves attracted to these groups because of my own past" (Interview Ethan). By educating them about his experiences, he hopes to increase their resilience. Damian, another former right-wing extremist father, shares the fear that his children may eventually end up in an extremist movement due to their family history. "That fear is always there. It still keeps me up, sometimes. But then again, for my kids, my door is always open to talk and communicate" (Interview Damian).

Three (former) jihadist respondents also indicate that at some point they want to tell their children about their history, as well as their experiences in prison. "But everything has a certain age, of course", interviewee Karim adds. Another (former) jihadist respondent, Nour, says that she always tried to be as honest and open as possible with her children. She never attempted to hide the fact that she is currently in prison:

> "I told the children that we were in IS territory and that IS actually did a lot of wrong things and that the police are now investigating whether mom participated in these things or not. And if the police say that I did participate, then I have to stay [in prison] for longer, and if the judge says 'No, I don't agree with that', then I can go home. I also said to the children: 'You know what mom is like, and we know what we are like, but the outside world doesn't know that, and they are now investigating that'" (Interview Nour)

(Former) jihadist detainee Abdelkader never told his children why they left for the IS 'caliphate'. Even during their stay in Syria and Iraq, he never discussed this with them, he says:

> "No, I never talked about that with my children. They were still too young. My daughter was six. What are you going to say to a six-year-old? They understood that bombings were taking place, and [they knew that] if they heard an airplane, a bomb was going to fall. Then they would say: 'Plane is a bad man'. But we just wanted to let them enjoy being a child. That may sound a bit strange, but it just wasn't the right time. I knew that those conversations would have to take place sooner or later" (Interview Abdelkader)

Mustafa, another Dutch detainee and (former) jihadist father, also says he did not talk to his daughter about his jihadist past. He believes that knowing about these details is not helpful to children. Mustafa therefore also did not tell her about the nature of his criminal conviction. He does not know whether his wife did have these kinds of conversations with their daughter:

> "I don't know if her mother explained that. I actually do not know. I didn't ask either. Some things you just don't want to know. I mean, how are you going to ask that? 'Did you tell her that her father is in jail?' I don't know how to ask such a question. So, then I'll think to myself: You know what, I'll just leave it" (Interview Mustafa)

Mustafa thinks that his daughter may have her suspicions about where her father is, especially now that she is getting older:

> "She does realize it, of course (…) When children are two or three years old, they may not know those things, but now it's starting to grow. Girls grow up a little faster than boys. She is very aware of what is going on around her. (…) As a five-year-old child, I always knew exactly where my father and mother were" (Interview Mustafa)

Dutch (former) jihadist Soufiane says that he is not planning on to telling his children anything about the time he spent in IS territory. "Absolutely nothing. I'm just going to lie to them. It is a state secret" (Interview Soufiane). He says that is even planning to submit a request to Google to have all news articles about him deleted upon his release. "Believe me, it's not going to help anyone if you put this burden on your family" (Interview Soufiane).

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

In this final Chapter I considered the long-term effects of extremist parenthood. Both children who grew up in an extremist family and former extremist parents themselves experience different consequences of their family history. Negative reactions from the outside world, including stigmatization and labeling, appear to be experienced regularly. Such hostilities may ultimately contribute to the transmission of extremist ideas within these households in two ways. On the one hand, it may strengthen extremist families' social isolation, limiting contact with dissenting opinions or worldviews, and thus enhancing the family ideology. On the other hand, it could fuel the sense of victimization that extremist ideologies often tap into. As observed in the previous chapters, perceptions of (collective) victimhood can play an important role in the narratives of these families, possibly contributing to the intergenerational transmission of these ideas (see also Pemberton & Aarten, 2018).

The fact that children do not necessarily follow in their parents' extremist footsteps is nonetheless evident from the fact that children from extremist families are able to break away from their parents' ideology. Almost all interview participants I spoke to have undergone a process of deradicalization, as described in this Chapter. This reflects an important shortcoming of the employed participant selection: deradicalized interviewees were easier to reach and more willing to participate in this study. As a result, I have not gained insight into the stories of people who did not decide to break away from their ideological upbringing. I therefore cannot make any statements about the differences between the individuals that did break away, and those that did not.

Nevertheless, the interviews and case file data indicates that there may be several reasons for children to leave the extremist family ideology behind. The role of counter-narratives and encounters with "the Other"; new forms of meaning-making, for example through (Eastern) religions; and self-study are central themes in these processes. This suggests that breaking through the isolated 'bubble' of extremist families is crucial to stimulate exposure to other narratives, and thus worldviews, in order to make deradicalization possible. This observation fits with previous research that points at the importance of opposing opinions and ideas in processes of deradicalization (Hansen & Lid, 2020; Koehler, 2016). The current study additionally shows that for some, cutting off contact with extremist family members in order to develop a new identity may be crucial. This finding fits with existing literature suggesting that for children raised in dysfunctional families, cutting ties may be an effective way to increase their resilience (e.g. Meyers, 2016; Schnarrs et al., 2020). It is nonetheless unclear how this observation relates to the suggested possibility of secure attachment styles among children raised by extremist parents, as discussed in Chapter 7. It can be hypothesized children who suffered from maltreatment or abuse – and resulting attachment issues – at the hands of their extremist parent(s), are more likely to consider cutting ties a necessary condition for their recovery.

Yet even respondents who managed to leave the extremist family ideology behind, tend to struggle with trauma and mental health issues. They also often have difficulties with managing their own parenthood, as some are afraid that their family history makes them unsuitable to raise a child. Some therefore decide to put their children up for adoption, or instead choose to adopt children themselves. Finally, the interviews suggest that former extremist parents are often also haunted by their past. They tend to look back with shame and regret on the parenting choices they made in the past. Some therefore opt for an honest and open conversation with their children, in which they explain the reasoning behind their decisions at the time. The interview data suggests that open communication is crucial for both parents and children to come to terms with the extremist family background. The fact that some (former jihadist) respondents indicate that they did not have these discussions with their children, and do not intend to do so, can in that regard be considered worrisome. This silence may, in the longer term, stimulate indirect transmission mechanisms, as observed in the section 'Romanticization of the ideology' in Chapter 6.

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