

The Preventive Role of Open Youth Work in Radicalisation and Extremism

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Open Youth Work in Austria means both working in youth centres, youth clubs, drop-in centres and working in public areas in the form of outreach work or detached youth work. It is financially supported mainly by the municipalities, sometimes by provincial governments and carried out by Non Profit Organisations. As Austria does not have a specific education for Youth Work professionals come from different kind of educational background (social worker, social pedagogy, arts etc.)

This article will not provide another theory of the phenomena of (youth) extremism. It will rather highlight the role of open youthwork in the prevention of radicalism and extremism and why the general principles of this approach are one of the keys to young people at risk.

Migration and Radicalisation

Other than in countries like UK and France the topic “radicalisation” – especially focused on young persons sympathising with Jihad - was not present in Austria until 2014, neither in public discussion nor in scientific dispute. This is insofar remarkable as it is usually linked with (Muslim) migrant groups and Austria, and specifically Vienna, has an extremely high percentage of those already for a long time.

When it comes to foreign born inhabitants in comparison of EU-28 Austria is constantly under the top 5 countries, currently third with more than 17% (Eurostat 2016a). This does not yet include figures of the 2015 refugee movements, when Austria took second most refugees per capita after Sweden (Eurostat 2016b). Focusing on citizenship from non EU countries Austria has third highest rate after Latvia and Estonia not considering that these two count their Russian ethnic minority as "foreigners". In Austria's capital Vienna persons not born in Austria reach 35% of all inhabitants (Stadt Wien 2014, p.37) including strong groups from western Balkan countries(10%), Turkey (4,3%) and Germany (2,9%). Taking a more broad definition of "migrant background" (at least one parent not born in Austria) the migrant population reaches 49% and more than 60% in the age groups under 19 (Stadt Wien 2014, p.39).

From the year 2012, thus long before the „Islamic State“ media hype in summer 2014, youth work practitioners increasingly reported a significant relevance of religion for many youngsters. They also detected an increase of one-sided-polarising ideology and an extreme increase of antisemitism among

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a large group of youngsters. There were also a few cases of young men leaving for Syria or planning to do so.

Since early 2014, extremism is a hotly debated issue in Austria, especially in the media. On the one hand it is an issue about young men, preferably (but not always) with migrant background, which „radicalised themselves“ or „were radicalised“ depending on one’s point of view. Some of them are even ready to kill for their belief, their religion, their ideology. On the other hand Austria has new movements like the „Identitären“(Identitarian Movement) which gain significant attention among young autochthon Austrians. Even though they do not play any role in youthwork in Vienna, other Austrian States have more significant trouble with their, to put it mildly, „extreme views“. In December 2014, an Extremism Information Centre was established by the Austrian Federal Network of Open Youth Work (BOJA). It is financed by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Families and Youth. The centre clearly points out that it offers advice, prevention and intervention in all cases of radicalism, religious, political, extremist right wing or radical Islam².

So far 2014 was the climax of the „Islamic State“-issue in Austria. Until end of 2015, according to Austrian Intelligence³, 267 persons have left for Syria as foreign fighters or supporters (some stopped before leaving, 44 confirmed dead, 67 returnees, rest still there or unknown), about 20 of them were youngsters known by Viennese Youth Workers. Those movements came to a standstill⁴ and also the verbal support or at least sympathy has significantly decreased. But this is true only if you limit the issue to “Islamic State” – or Daesh how they would be called in Arabic. I would like to severely warn against doing so. The main issues are still there and need to be dealt with. Antisemitism, Homophobia, debasing, pejorative and insulting behaviour towards females and absolutely everybody with a different opinion is – connected with (often pseudo-)religious or “ethnic” values - still prevalent.

The Viennese Youth Department launched a large research among users of Open Youth Work providers in winter 2014/15 “Open youth work in the light of collective pejorative attitudes and identities”. 400 interviews on 65 items and 20 in depth interviews with youngsters were carried out and the results will bring useful information on several issues. Already a pre-study among 45 youth work unit directors pointed out the aspired diversity within users of the services (youth centres and detached youth work) is reached, in doing so there is even a shifting towards persons with migrant background.

Graph 1 shows the geographical family background of users of Open Youth Work Services in Vienna, age group 14-20

Graph 2 shows migration background of users of Open Youth Work Services in Vienna compared to population in the same age group 14 -20

² <https://www.familienberatung.gv.at/beratungsstelleextremismus/en/> [19.6.2016]

³ http://diepresse.com/home/panorama/wien/4958349/Gridling_Wir-sind-keine-Sozialarbeiter [7.6.2016]

⁴ Based on personal information provided by Austrian Counter Terrorism Agency

As it is declared policy that this municipal service should focus on socially disadvantaged children and youth this can be considered a success which is also confirmed by a comprehensive evaluation of the services in 2013 which includes more background data on the persons reached (L&R Sozialforschung 2014).

Principles of Open Youth Work and their role in extremism prevention

The theoretical debate has shown that some of the principles of open youth work in Austria play an essential role in the prevention of extremism, if they are adequately applied.

Referring to the Theory of Change of Open Youth Work in Vienna, youth work is aimed at „enabling youth“(youth in the sense of adolescence). The period of adolescence nowadays is no longer a protected space period in which young people grow up largely unchallenged by economic compulsions, develop their identity and prepare for job and life – usually predetermined by the family and its social status.

‘Jugend reibt sich immer weniger an der Erwachsenenwelt, sondern sucht früh sich in ihr zu verbergen, in ihr unterzukommen (youth challenges the world of adults less and less but rather tries to hide away in it, to be accommodated in it)’ (Böhnisch 2012, p.140). In this sense Lothar Böhnisch, one of the leading German youth researchers, says it is more and more the function of Open Youth Work to „enable youth“; meaning to give them the chance to act beyond the requirements of the adult world and the working environment *‘Sie trifft dabei vor allem auf sozial benachteiligte Jugendliche, denen der Experimentierstatus Jugend verwehrt ist, oder den sie sich risikoreich zu erkämpfen versuchen und dabei immer wieder in riskanten Bewältigungslagen hängen bleiben (It [youth work] encounters mainly socially disadvantaged youngsters, who lack possibilities of making different experiences, which they then try to make sometimes with high risk and often get stuck in negative circumstances)’(Böhnisch 2012, p.142).*

Hence key tasks for Open Youth Work are enabling self-expression, self-efficacy and creating an appreciative environment (Verein Wiener Jugendzentren 2014, p.10). Association of Viennese Youth Centre's theoretical concept summarises *‘Offene Jugendarbeit „ermöglicht Jugend“ in diesem Sinne, indem sie Raum, Zeit und Beziehungen zur Verfügung stellt und dabei insbesondere die emotionale Komponente, die Lust und den Spaß an der Sache, an der Begegnung und Auseinandersetzung ins Zentrum rückt. Open Youthwork "makes youth possible" [enables adolescence] as it provides time, space and relationship and particularly focuses on emotional components, fun, encounter and things young people are keen to debate on’(Verein Wiener Jugendzentren 2014, p.11)*

Following this model certain principles of Open Youth Work gain a significant importance when it comes to prevention of radicalism and extremism⁵:

⁵ Compare with Verein Wiener Jugendzentren (2012) p.14 and Bundesweites Netzwerk offene Jugendarbeit (2011)

Openness: Open Youthwork is generally open to all young people in the respective age groups, regardless of origin, education, conviction or any other precondition.

Following this openness, a **Low Threshold** is another essential element, the conception, time and space of the services allow easy access, offers and themes are led by the reality of the life of youth. There is no pressure to consume; offerings are free of charge, direct and without precondition and obligation.

Key principle, from which the specific methodology mainly is deduced, undoubtedly is **Voluntariness** of participation and the possibility to leave the activities at any time without consequences.

The **Professional Relationship**, which also includes confidentiality and transparency, enables a reliable, functional and emotional escort of adolescent. This stable frame offers orientation, social competences, diversity of opinions and actions in a time of testing yourself and finding out your and the societies limits.

A special role in working with youth vulnerable to extremism is played by the principle of the **Biased Mandate**. Open Youth Work generally acts with regard to the interests, rights, competences and needs of young people. In cases of conflict, Youth Work is on their side. In the context of radical and extremist views, many colleagues see this as leading to a number of contradictions. Firstly, many of the viewpoints of the youth are totally contrary to the individual values of the youth workers and also those outlined and propagated in the youth work conception. And secondly, those youngsters' behaviour is also often connected with verbal and sometimes even physical violation of other youth (e.g. in a youth club). But those others must also be protected and supported by the youth worker. Often it is hard to keep track with those who offended and also not to neglect those who were their victims.

Causes, triggers and motives

If there is at least one thing research on violent terrorism can worldwide agree on, then it is the fact that there is no unique identifiable cause for persons affiliating to extreme violent groups. Magnus Ranstorp offers a comprehensive collection of causes (Ranstorp, 2016) which have more or less influence in one or the other cases. Among others individual, socio-psychological, social and political factors count. The role of Religion is one of the most discussed. 'It's Islam' and 'It has nothing to do with religion' seem to be most heard viewpoints.

Poor inclusion in society, a lack of personal perspective and orientation always have been a breeding ground for extremism. Individual traumas might trigger, group pressure, social media and others are supportive. But in the same way inadequate demarcation of mainstream politics to far right offers them justification for inhuman politics, even violence and religion sometimes has the same offer. Ruud Koopmans did extensive research results on this topic (Koopmans 2014) and shows how deep

some pejorative narratives and prejudices are rooted in certain religious communities.

Anyway, when we are talking about youth and radicalism, a lack of personal perspective is the major factor. No or poor education, hardly chances on the job market, expensive housing are essentials to raise vulnerability. Another, often underestimated point is young people's search for orientation in a metaphysical or spiritual sense. The search for a "sense in life" is not only a matter for well educated, distinguished middle- or upper class youngsters. Youth worker in Vienna were facing a boost of discussion and questions in recent years. And it is those educationally disadvantaged young people, often with a migrant background who are asking.

And for them religion often has an offer. Simple patterns of good and bad, guilt and innocence provide simple solutions or at least explanations. "Us" and "them", deliverance of own responsibility and sweeping judgement of "them" being guilty for individual and universal suffering are typical for any extremist viewpoint. Additionally in Islam Imams promoting a fundamentalist viewpoint stick to easy understandable basic rules which would if strictly obeyed bring relief whatever the person has done before.

If other agents of socialisation fail in their educational function - or sometimes even support the process because they first see rather stabilisation of the person than radicalisation - it's an easy game for rabble rousers of any kind.

Jochen Müller, Götz Nordbruch and Deniz Ünlü describe all this in a comprehensive way and in relation to religious motivated extremism. According to them the three key attributes of radicalisation are: Ultimate authority of the putative original and only doctrine, degradation of dissidents and strict denial of democracy. The motives for radicalisation are: Search for knowledge and truth, obedience, community and justice. All those convey identity and "sense" using basic, easy understandable paradigms (Müller, Nordbruch, Ünlü; 2014 p. 149ff). Biographical research on young neo-nazi in Germany comes to similar results and the conclusions drawn by Kleeberg-Niepage (2012) can be transferred to youth with tendency to religious determined extremism.

Open youth work per se can represent one of the often searched alternative narratives when it comes to preventive work with youth at risk. Open youth work is positioned directly in the daily live of youngsters and holds credibility and authenticity. Furthermore open youth work can offer support for individual de-radicalisation programmes for persons ideologically already consolidated. The "*Good Practise Guidelines and Principles*" (Weilnböck, 2013) of the Europe-wide recognized "Violence Prevention Network", which are trendsetting in deradicalisation, show significant similarities with the principles of Open Youth Work.

Principles for the work with youth sharing extremists' opinions in Open Youthwork

Based on the findings so far we can draft the following principles specifically for Open Youth Work

in the context of extreme, polarising-downgrading attitudes, behaviours and identities of youth. Those principles are generally applicable, independent of the extremist background, whether it is religiously motivated or ethnic-nationalist. They are derived from the general principles, partly outlined above, are action guiding and must be adapted to the situation and concerned target groups.

Openness for all

As outlined in the general principles, openness in the form of a "positive welcome culture" for everybody, combined with the voluntariness in participation, is the structural key, the entrance to Open Youth Work. It enables the youth worker to get into contact and relationship with groups who are often no longer approachable for anybody else. This is also facilitated by an absence of any formal barriers, no pressure to commitment up to anonymity.

Create an open but also safe and constructive environment for dispute and discussion

It is a quite demanding and ambitious challenge behind this principle, namely take and accept the youngsters as they are, with all their opinions (also those narrow-minded, downgrading and pejorative ones). Give them some safety but at the same time don't let them take over and exploit the whole youth club. Active participation of the youngsters and taking over responsibility by them are an important part of this principle.

Have an own clear and arguable political position

To have an attitude of acceptance towards youth does not mean not to have an own, maybe different political opinion. Quite the contrary, in the context of extremism it is essential to develop your own standpoint and also to **clearly express it**. In this respect, Open Youth Work acts as a part of the education system in terms of Human Rights Education. In the scope of which are equality of all human beings and in this sense it is a counter narrative to all ideologies (and religions) of inequality. At the same time, it stimulates the articulation and the promotion of one's own interests, which is beneficial for the youth. This principle is also particularly challenging because it requires the full authenticity of the youth worker. In this sensitive area it is not possible to promote standpoints which one personally does not support 100%.

Know the world of youth

What is evident for youth work in general also especially applies here. Explicit knowledge about the immediate living environment, the social, economic and cultural conditions of youth, is a fundamental precondition for working with them.

Professional knowledge on issues which are important for youth

Hardly any other issue is so much discussed in the current dispute about the work with „radicalised youngsters“ as this one. Hidden behind this discussion is the question of the role of religion in radicalisation in general. Regarding current developments, there is one thesis saying that only religiously well and intensely educated persons (such as religious educators or imams) are able to sustainably work with those kids, because only they can show them the „right“ (religious) way by

delivering the „right“ translation and interpretation (of religious text). However, this is a contradiction to another thesis – often held and promoted by the same persons - that radicalism doesn't have anything to do with religion.

In the end it is about striking a balance – the social worker, youth worker, therapist, whoever is working with those youngsters, has no other choice than to deal with their themes and this includes religion as well. But it is not about deep, it is about SOLID knowledge, such as for all other themes and issues which are important for youth. E.g. when one is working with youth at a risk of drug abuse, it is important to have a certain knowledge about legal and illegal substances and their effects, but it is not necessary to be a medical doctor.

As in the drug example, in working with radical youth, it sometimes makes sense to consult and involve a religious expert. In working with those kids, professional and solid knowledge about religion is also important for the youth worker. It is not necessary to have attained one's own degree in religious studies, especially when it is about prevention.

Judge on behaviour, not on person

A permanent professional relationship on a volunteer basis can only work with a mutual appreciation of the involved persons. So in the case of verbal or physical offense, the misbehaviour of the person must be in the focus of criticism and not the person itself, especially when it is about violence, glorification of violence, about racism, no matter whether of verbal or physical.

Set clear borders still respecting the person

Borders must be absolutely clearly defined, meaning both the borders in behaviour and in expression (verbal, written, ...). Borders must be explained coherently and should not appear random. Violation of those borders must be addressed immediately and in an appropriate way, sometimes also requiring sanction. This is a principle sometimes hard to follow, because it challenges the quality of the relationship between the youth worker and the youth. But especially for persons searching for orientation, clear boundaries are all the more important and frequently it is surprising how thankful they often are accepted. Not least, they are a sign of taking those youngsters seriously, that it matters for the youth worker who they are, what they are thinking and doing.

Time and Continuity

It is important to be aware of the fact that prevention (and also de-radicalisation) is something which needs time and continuity. You have to keep an eye on the ongoing process and need to formulate proper (intermediate) outcomes, regularly reflect and evaluate this to adjust your strategy if necessary.

The European Union recently acknowledged the importance of the youth sector in countering extremism. On 30 May 2016, the Council of the EU adopted conclusions on the role of the youth sector in an integrated and cross-sectoral approach to preventing and combating violent radicalisation of young people. Several issues such as the holistic approach, the role of the youth sector in

developing an own identity and the cooperation with other sectors, specifically formal education, are outlined. Member states are invited to strengthen support for the youth sector in several fields and actions.

It is not necessary to develop new principles, not even new approaches. As this paper tries to figure out basics and also a lot of best practise is already developed, still in many countries this has to be promoted and proper resources have to be provided. However, it is important to recall those basically known principles and adapt them to the current needs. Even though it is essential to resolutely contradict mass media's dramatization of radicalisation and to put things into perspective, it is also not to be ignored that some polarising pejorative behaviours among youngsters are increasing. The amount of sympathy for Daesh, Salafist movements and their right wing "counter-movements" (which share the same attitudes at the end of the day) do not give ground for hope that those phenomena will disappear soon.

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English information in the web:

Association of Viennese Youth Centres (Verein Wiener Jugendzentren): <http://typo.jugendzentren.at/vjz/index.php?188>

BOJA – Federal Network for Open Youth Work: <http://www.boja.at/english/>

POYWE – Professional Open Youth Work in Europe: <http://poywe.org>

Extremism Information Centre: <https://www.familienberatung.gv.at/beratungsstelleextremismus/en/>