A LIFE-COURSE ANALYSIS OF ENGAGEMENT IN VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS

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In this exploratory study, individuals’ processes of engagement in violent extremist groups are analysed by drawing from criminological life-course theory and narrative-based understandings of crime. Based on interviews with individuals who have participated in violent extremism, it is suggested that the process of engagement consists of three steps: (1) a weakening of informal social controls, followed by (2) an interaction with individuals in proximity to the group and (3) a stage of meaning-making in relation to the group and one’s identity, resulting in an individual’s willingness and capacity to engaging in the group’s activities, including violence. In future theorizing about processes of engagement in violent extremism, the meanings of age, and the life-course stages of late adolescence and emerging adulthood in particular, should be given analytic attention.

Key Words: violent extremism, engagement, life-course criminology, narratives

Introduction

Violent extremism shows a curious relationship to age. Like criminal behaviour, engagement in violent extremism seems to increase through the later stages of adolescence and into emerging adulthood, followed by a decrease throughout adulthood. For example, in a study of Swedish foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq, Gustafsson and Ranstorp (2017: 81) found an ‘overwhelming majority of youths and young adults’. This finding has been replicated by others (Rostami et al. 2018) and across different forms of violent extremism (Silke 2008; Kimmel 2018). Just like most criminal careers, engagement typically lasts for a relatively short period of time, with individuals disengaging a few years after having first engaged (Horgan 2009; Björgo 2011).

While age is one of the most consistent correlates of violent extremism (e.g. being a young male is the ‘best’ predictor of such engagement, see Monahan 2017), it has been left largely untouched by those who have theorized the process. Instead, explanations generally subscribe to the same basic idea: radicalization into a violent extremist group takes the shape of a process of deepening engagement observable in changing behaviours (e.g. Moghaddam 2005; Silber and Bhatt 2007; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008; Kruglanski and Orehek 2011).

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Some studies suggest that individuals who engage in violent extremism are slightly older than those committing generic crimes (Klausen et al. 2016). However, in the study cited, in cases of violent domestic attacks and becoming foreign fighters, the peak ages were 21 and 19, respectively.

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In a recent analysis of radicalization studies, Ahmad and Monaghan (2019: 2) find a ‘spectrum of criminological theories ... [but] a strong tendency towards individualistic and policy-oriented theory’. Criminological perspectives on violent extremism thus include subcultural theory (Pisiou 2015), rational choice theory (Perry and Hasisi 2015), control and learning theory (LaFree et al. 2018) and situational action theory (Bouhana and Wikström 2010). In a case study of the January 2015 terror attacks in France, Walklate and Mythen (2016: 343) argue that criminological perspectives need to ‘understand the situated life experiences and biographies’ of individuals who engage with violent extremism and situate such experiences in a macro setting. One way of approaching such issues is through a life-course perspective. While grounded in individual biography, a life-course perspective also entails contextual elements, since how our lives unfold is partly a result of social organization (Shanahan and MacMillan 2008), with life-course stages such as adolescence and emerging adulthood being understood as ‘positions in social structure’ (Matza 1964: 45).

Analysing life history interviews conducted with a small sample of individuals who have engaged in violent extremist groups, this study explores people’s pathways into such groups by using life-course criminological tools and elements from narrative criminology (Presser 2009). In our analysis, we devote significant attention to the contingencies of late adolescence and, in particular, emerging adulthood and highlight age-contingent dynamics in the process of engagement.

*Explaining Individual-Level Engagement in Violent Extremism*

As a construct, violent extremism emerges at the intersection of politics, research and public debate. Here, violent extremism includes any group or individual defined as extreme on a given scale (such as religious or political), adopting the threat or use of illegal force and violence to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion and/or intimidation (LaFree et al. 2018). In contemporary Western, democratic contexts, violent extremism is often divided into four categories: right-wing, left-wing, Islamic and what might be termed ‘single-issue extremism’, such as animal rights and environmentalism (Gill et al. 2014). At first sight, this categorization may seem to lump together very different groups: should a large and systematically violent group such as ISIS be equalled to that of smaller right-wing extremist or animal rights groups? However, the fact that the groups may differ in several important ways should not lead us to assume that individual-level processes of engagement with such groups must systematically differ as well. In fact, studies tend to show similarity rather than difference in this regard (e.g. Ali et al. 2017). While we are likely to find variation between individuals’ processes of engagement, whether or not these can be explained by the group with which they engage is something to be discovered rather than assumed.

*Towards a life-course criminology of violent extremist engagement*

For life-course criminology, age is a key concept. The changes individuals go through as they proceed from childhood through adolescence and emerging adulthood are basic building blocks in nearly all theories of crime and desistance, from Matza (1964) to Moffitt (1993) and beyond (Paternoster 2017). During adolescence, parents’
supervision decreases, the importance of peer and romantic relations increases, the individual spends more time away from home and more frequently engages in pastime activities (e.g. Warr 2002). Following adolescence comes a stage Arnett (2004) defines as the period from around age 18 to 25: emerging adulthood. Its most central feature is ‘that it is the time when young people explore possibilities for their lives in a variety of areas’ (Arnett 2004: 8). In other words, most identity exploration takes place in emerging adulthood rather than in adolescence (Waterman 1999), including explorations of values and religious beliefs. As such, Arnett (2004: 10) writes, programs such as AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps find many of their volunteers in the pool of emerging adults because they ‘have both the freedom to pull up stakes quickly in order to go somewhere and the inclination to do something unusual’.

Our point of departure is an age-graded version of social control theory (Sampson and Laub 1993), which emphasizes how bonds to society’s institutions—e.g. family, school, pro-social routine activities, higher education, work—continuously prevent individuals from engaging in crime and deviance. When these bonds are weakened or broken, the risk for crime and deviance increases. This line of argument is similar to McAdam’s (1986) notion of biographic availability. Below a certain age, due to the dynamics of social control in childhood and early adolescence, engagement in high-risk activism, such as violent extremism, is highly unlikely. However, in adolescence and emerging adulthood, the individual is both relatively independent from the authorities of childhood and not yet committed to the projects of adulthood.

Freed from the constraints of informal social controls, the individual is available for a number of influences, such as peers or alternative role models (McGloin 2009). Studies consistently show that people who are at risk for engagement in violent extremism tend to associate with others who already do so (Monahan 2017). The age-contingent importance of adolescent peer affiliations for generic crime has been extensively studied, and findings generally suggest that peer influence wanes as individuals move towards adulthood (e.g. Monahan et al. 2009). Less is known about peer groups in emerging adulthood. Compared to adolescents, they tend to have a more diverse social life with peers (Lansu and Cillessen 2012) and most do not belong to a single, isolated friendship clique. Instead, they are affiliated with many loosely bound groups with varying degrees of cohesion and permeability (Haynie 2001). Individuals are not wholly free to choose their affiliations, of course. The available number and type of networks are limited by factors including age, gender, cultural, and socio-economic factors (Brown et al. 1990), making the affiliations people eventually find a particularly important source of behavioural influence, especially in emerging adulthood (Arnett 2004).

Such findings align quite well with recent European scholars’ attempts to explain young people’s engagement in Islamic extremism through what can be interpreted as a weakening of social controls (Kepel 2017; Roy 2017) and affiliations with specific social networks (Hegghammer 2013; Nesser et al. 2016). Similarly, Sageman (2008) found that 90 per cent of the individuals he studied had joined Islamic extremism with either friends or kin, a finding that permeates the literature (e.g. Atran 2008; Nesser et al. 2016).

Behaviours such as crime and engagement in violent extremism can be understood as processes, during which the person forms a conception of this behaviour in interaction with others (Becker 1963; Matza 1969; Simi et al. 2016). This may be particularly salient in adolescence and emerging adulthood because, as Arnett notes, very few people at age 18 have a well-established worldview, but ‘few people leave their twenties without
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One (Arnett 2004: 166). In other words, engagement also entails not only the adoption of a certain worldview but also new scripts of thinking and talking which influence future actions (e.g. Sykes and Matza 1957; Presser 2009). As Sandberg (2016: 155) argues, through narratives, people construct identities, understand themselves and others and ‘respond to what is the appropriate thing to do’. Such narrative-based understandings of violent extremism are relatively rare (e.g. Joosse et al. 2015) but useful for uncovering how processes of engagement can be imbued with meaning and self-realization as well as making certain forms of otherwise illicit actions possible (Maruna and Copes 2005). The dynamics of these processes are at the centre of our analysis.

Data and Methods

This study is based on life history interviews with individuals who have participated in violent extremism. The Swedish Security Service estimates that around 3,000 individuals in Sweden support, recruit and assist violent extremist groups (The Swedish Security Service 2018). Whereas right-wing and left-wing extremism have long been regarded as problematic from a democratic perspective (Lööw 2004; Flyghed 2013), Islamic extremism emerged as a political problem in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

In the case of right-wing extremism, the largest and most visible organization is the Nordic Resistance Movement (NMR, previously known as the Swedish Resistance Movement or SMR). The NMR is often described as a violent, national socialist organization, with the aim of creating a National Socialist republic through violent revolution. In Sweden, NMR is divided into seven geographic zones, or ‘nests’, covering the whole country (for an overview of radical right-wing movements in Sweden and the Nordic countries, see Widfeldt 2018). Swedish left-wing extremism refers to various fractions of loose anti-fascist networks supporting a leftist, socialist ideology, such as Antifascist Action (AFA) and the Revolutionary Front (RF). While highly active and visible in both the streets and media during the mid-2000s up until a few years ago, today, these groups are considered less active than they were before (The Swedish Security Service 2018).

Turning to Islamic extremism, there are no clearly defined formal organizations or movements. Rather, such extremist groups have the form of loose, informal networks, framed by what can be termed a fundamentalist, Salafi doctrine of Sunni Islam. Groups such as ISIS view the contemporary world as one in which there is an on-going, global war against Muslims, which must be combated by force. The ultimate goal, claimed to be realized by ISIS in 2014, is the resurrection of the caliphate; an Islamic state. Since 2012, 267 individuals, mostly young men, have travelled from Sweden as so-called foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq to support and fight for ISIS (Gustafsson and Ranstorp 2017). Of these, between 40 and 50 have died. A recent study of deceased, Swedish foreign fighters showed that their average age was just below 26 and over two-thirds had a history of criminal involvement (Rostami et al. 2018).

Locating interviewees

To date, an impediment to the application of life-course criminological tools may be the lack of suitable data on violent extremism. Gaining access to interview individuals with
a history of violent extremism is a difficult task, well-documented by others (Sageman 2014; Nilsson 2018). We initially contacted Swedish ‘Exit’ organizations which work with individuals who have, or are in the process of, or desire to disengage from violent extremist groups in Sweden’s three largest cities. We also approached NGOs, local police authorities and the social services in the same cities. This generated 10 interviewees, conducted by the first or second author. Nine interviews were conducted in Swedish and one in English.

The interviewees likely constitute a highly skewed sample. We cannot distinguish if (and how) people who come into contact with, e.g., NGOs and local police authorities differ from those who do not. It is reasonable to assume that their processes of disengagement have been more complicated, for example. For ethical and practical reasons, we approached our interviewees through a set of gatekeepers (such as employees at the NGOs). The gatekeepers forwarded our query to potential interviewees, who could contact us directly or go through the gatekeeper. Due to this design, it is impossible to discern which individuals the gatekeeper actually approached (and if so, how) and if those individuals who did not consent to an interview differed from those who consented. At the same time, such limitations are common and, in the case of qualitative violent extremism studies, seem nearly inevitable (Nilsson 2018).

Each interview lasted between 3 and 4 hours, generating roughly 55–65 pages of verbatim transcripts. The interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview guide with themes covering the individual’s life up until the point of the interview. It included questions about the interviewee’s experiences of violent extremism, including processes of engagement, organizing within the groups and disengagement and desistance processes. The interviews also included extensive questions about his or her childhood, school and family experiences, leisure activities, adolescence, peer relations, victimization and criminal histories, educational and employment histories and aspirations, the transition to adulthood and other life events.² The interviews were conducted in shopping malls, coffee shops, the authors’ offices and in the interviewees’ homes. The time and location of the interview was decided by the interviewee.

Stages of analysis

Life history narratives ‘explain people’s behavior with a sequence of events that connect up to explanatory goals, motivations, and feelings’ (Maruna 2001: 40). Importantly, life histories do not contain perfect factual representations of history but rather capture how individuals experience their lives and create meaning within the constraints and opportunities that they face. The focus of the analysis was to explore these meanings and experiences.

The interview transcripts in total amount to over 600 pages of single-spaced text. These were coded using the ‘Node’ functions in the QSR NVivo 11 Software. Beginning with a form of open coding, the first author categorized every extract containing descriptions of engagement and/or the factors, events and processes leading up to it. To

²Life history interviews are limited by their retrospective nature. In an attempt to determine these limitations in our sample, for each interviewee, we used open source data (court verdicts, newspaper articles, text and video posts on social media and other publicly available information) to help us estimate the validity of the interview data. To the extent that we can tell, these alternative sources tended to support the interviewees’ narratives.
capture the sequential and temporal dimension of the engagement process, these extracts were sorted and ordered chronologically. This allowed for an aggregated, albeit fractured reading of the process of engagement as told by our interviewees.

As our analysis searched for patterns in these interview extracts, we moved to a more focussed coding to develop a theoretical understanding that closely fitted the data (Emerson et al. 2011). First, we studied all extracts containing descriptions of the first step towards engagement. Here, we adopted a form of compare/contrast thematic analysis, which is effective for generating abstractions while still being grounded in data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Consider the events of being suspended from school for 18 months at the age of 17 and the ending of a sports career one has invested significant time and energy in. At the concrete empirical level, these events seem highly different. On a more abstract level, however, they can be understood as attenuating immediate, informal social controls, making the individual less tied to structured routine activities and less committed to a certain line of activity. At this level, the events are not unique but variations of the same theoretical idea.

Having done so, we studied all extracts, including descriptions of the next step, and applied the same systematic compare/contrast method to them and so on. This way, the process of engagement could be analytically divided into three different steps. The processes, pathways and themes in the analyses below are, thus, based on close readings and analyses of the 10 life histories. A simplified, schematic overview of these concrete, empirical pathways are listed in Table 1.

The interviewees

Nine interviewees are male and one is female. Their ages at the time of interview ranged from 24 to 38. Six individuals had a history of Islamic extremism—predominantly within groups either directly part of or supporting ISIS—three had engaged in right-wing extremism (such as the NMR and their national socialist forerunners) and one had a history of engagement in left-wing extremism (such as the RF or AFA, i.e. groups with an ideological basis in socialism). They come from varying socio-economic and demographic backgrounds, but all engaged in violent extremism during adolescence or emerging adulthood (their ages at the time of engagement varied between 16 and 20). All interviewees had, by their own definition, disengaged at the time of interview, some fairly recently (about one year prior to the interview) and others up to 10 years ago (we uncovered no narrative differences in how they spoke about their experiences in this regard). Average time of involvement was roughly two years. Seven individuals had a criminal history prior to engagement, with four of them having been involved in street gangs and committed gang-related offenses.

Violent extremism is, as noted, a construct. Rather than being a discrete event, engagement is seen as a process throughout which the individual becomes embedded within the group. Previous studies have included not only actual acts of violence but also behaviours such as providing material and economic support for terrorist groups (e.g. Klausen et al. 2016). In the present study, all interviewees had participated in violent acts as part of their engagement, either in Sweden or abroad, including threats, assault, robbery, manslaughter and murder. Their crimes, it should be noted, were not limited to violence but also included theft and drug-related offenses. While the interviewees
| Interviewee  | Extremism         | A weakening of informal social controls                                                                 | An interaction with peers in proximity to the group                                      | A stage of meaning-making in relation to the group and one’s identity |
|-------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ashar (M)*  | Islamic           | After high-school graduation, around age 18–19, a vacuum with much spare time                          | Going to a mosque with a group of local friends learning about people fighting a war for Islam getting in contact with people in Syria | Finding a new sense of place; wanting to participate in the creation of a new ‘Golden Age’ for Muslims; fight oppression from the West and help the people of Syria |
| Damir (M)*  | Islamic           | Having aborted higher education and not having a job, ‘not doing anything’ around age 20               | Connecting with an important friend via Facebook links to Western Jihadis in Syria        | Wanting to help Muslim brothers and sisters being ‘slaughtered by Bashar’; seeing oneself as a ‘helper’, being able to help through the group |
| Eric (M)*   | Right-wing        | School suspension, violence, having ‘huge chunks of time to kill’ around age 17–18                     | Starting to spend more time with nationalist friends becoming part of that group finding new friends through online communication towards NMR | Seeing oneself as part of a larger project, where one’s capacity for violence is channelled through a meaningful outlet |
| Frede (M)   | Right-wing        | Doing well in school but increasingly isolated from other social arenas up to age 16                  | Emailing with ‘local skinheads’ becoming part of that group finding new friends through online communication towards NMR | Finding something to ‘be part of’; developing a sense of self through the project of activism |
| Habir (M)** | Islamic           | Being imprisoned due to gang-related crimes around age 19, living a highly unstructured life centred on selling drugs | Starting to pray in jail/prison when released, many in his neighbourhood have undergone a ‘religious change’, having a brother who travelled to (and died) in Syria | Finding something to replace the feeling of ‘emptiness’ with |
became differentially embedded in their respective groups, we should stress that they were not drifting around the edges of violent extremism. On the contrary, several interviewees came to occupy relatively central positions within them.

Table 1  Continued

| Interviewee | Extremism  | A weakening of informal social controls | An interaction with peers in proximity to the group | A stage of meaning-making in relation to the group and one’s identity |
|-------------|-----------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Isa (M)     | Islamic   | Termination of a high-level sports career, without other important commitments or attachments at 20 | Childhood Muslim friends --> Salafist Sub-Group --> Local Jihadi Core | Experiencing oneself as oppressed and part of a defining struggle for Muslims; wanting to become a ‘martyr’ for the cause |
| Johnny (M)** | Right-wing | Experiencing excessive bullying, becoming isolated and alone, involved in criminal activity at 17 | Meeting ‘mentor’ from a nationalist group --> forming a group of ‘like-minded’ people | Seeing oneself as part of a project of ‘White Resistance’ to the ‘multi-cultural’ street gangs |
| Khaula (F)** | Islamic  | Experiencing a romantic break-up, being involved in crime and unable to desist around age 22 | Her older brother, being a Salafist Muslim, travelling to Syria --> connections to Syria | Redefinition from ‘Female Gangster’ to seeing oneself as a warrior for Muslim women, against Western oppression |
| Tom (M)     | Left-wing | Experiencing his parents’ divorce, living with one parent, skips school a lot, relatively isolated and bullied (for being non-white) at ages 15–16 | Going to demonstrations and rallies for refugees/social justice/etc --> meeting people attached to anti-fascist groups --> Invited to attend a counter-demonstration against a local right-wing extremist group | Having felt ‘unsafe’ and ‘alone’ without anything to do (except playing videogames), the self-image now becomes meaningful and powerful; becoming a ‘nazi hunter’ as a way to resist oppression and repression |
| Wabid (M)** | Islamic  | Being sentenced to prison due to gang-related crimes around age 20 | Seeing the prison’s imam --> developing an interest in Islam --> post-parole, seeking out ‘like-minded’ Salafists --> hearing about Western Jihadists in Syria | Developing a new sense of meaning; finding answers to questions of identity and meaning; ‘Salafism is very simple, it answers the question of life’ |
Despite clear selection effects, then, the interviewees differ in many ways, including their criminal histories, socio-economic status and time since disengagement. These variations allow for an exploratory close-range analysis of similarities and differences in the interviewees’ processes of engagement, with implications for a theoretical understanding of engagement processes (Kvale and Brinkmann 2008).

**Findings and Analysis**

In our sample, engagement in a violent extremist group unfolded in a series of steps: (1) a weakening of immediate, informal social controls, (2) an interaction with individuals in proximity to the group and (3) a phase of meaning-making in relation to the group and one’s identity, resulting in an individual willing and capable of engaging in the group’s activities, including the use of violence. Throughout these steps, the individual’s everyday life, including relationships and routine activities, came to be centred on the group, its overarching project and activities. As shown below, these steps are contingent on the conditions of adolescence and emerging adulthood (the life-course stages when all interviewees’ engagement processes begun and unfolded).

**A weakening of informal social control**

Throughout our sample of interviewees, the process of engagement was initiated by an event, such as dropping out of school, losing a job (or not getting a job one had applied for) or breaking up with a romantic partner. These factors or predictors are well-known in the literature (e.g. Monahan 2017). As studies on the relationship between age and generic crime has repeatedly shown, such events are empirically more likely to occur during these stages compared to other stages (e.g. Shanahan and MacMillan 2008; Mowen and Bowan 2018). They also have age-contingent consequences. As they often occur in adolescence and emerging adulthood, they tend to put the individual in a state of drift (Matza 1964) or, in Arnett’s (2004) terms, generate a sense of social instability:

**Interviewer:** I was thinking, before you go down [to Syria], what was your life like? How was an ordinary day in your life at that point?

**Damir:** No, actually, nothing. I did nothing. Just eat and sleep, wake up, sleep, wake up. Of course, you know, I got outside and took walks and met with people but /…/ What was missing was a, like a job or school [which he had recently dropped out of]. And, that’s not why I went, it wasn’t because I didn’t have school or anything like that, you see. But it would have been better if you, if you were busy doing something, you see.

Approaching age 20, Damir found himself in what Matza (1964: 69) terms ‘episodic release’ from society’s major institutions. Such release can occur in many ways. Consider the case of Isa who, like Damir, travelled to Syria to become a foreign fighter for ISIS. Throughout adolescence, Isa performed well in school, had good ties to his parents and family, and did not engage in crime; on the contrary, Isa had a strong stake in conformity by aspiring to play sports at a professional level. After high school, he pursued his dream of ‘making it big’ while at the same time having to support himself economically. Isa

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For clarity and presentation, minor edits in the extracts have been made, indicated with a ‘/…/’.
worked ‘to pay the bills’ but did not value the jobs he had, he did not live with any partner at the time and did not have many friends outside of the ‘sports scene’; instead, his ‘full heart’ was in sports, until his career—as happens to the majority of athletes—stalled.

Isa: You know, I do things 100 percent. There is no halfhearted, when I did sports I put 100 percent into it./…/ doing some half-hearted work at [a warehouse company], there was no future, I mean, no, it was the sports. That [working] was more about getting an income aside from the sports, because it didn’t pay. /…/ So it was more about getting an income to pursue my dream of becoming a sports star, you could say. /…/ There were even contracts. Contracts [about competing] abroad in the making, and stuff like that, but they never happened.

Interviewer: How come?
Isa: A lot of things, you know, lots of, like, little things. It’s experience, for one thing. I was pretty young, they wanted someone older. Experienced, a lot of it is like that. /…/ But there’re a lot of circumstances, you need some luck too.

The disruption of an important life trajectory led to an experience echoed by the other interviewees: ‘I remember feeling really … like, unstable at the time, not psychologically, but sort of socially, or existentially’, Ashar said when describing the time after his graduation from high school. ‘I wasn’t really connected to anything’. Across our sample of interviewees, the specific, lived experiences may vary but they can be analytically understood as constituting the same mechanism of weakened social control, resulting in a state of instability. Ali et al. (2017) allude to a similar process when discussing the increased risk of engagement in violent extremism as individuals are involved in important life-course transitions, such as graduation or unemployment.

In studies of violent extremism, such changes are commonly understood in terms of threats to ‘personal significance’ resulting in frustration and anger. As a result, people attempt to restore their lost significance through attachment to a new social group (i.e. violent extremism, see Kruglanski and Orehek 2011). Our analysis suggests that they can also be understood as a result of an everyday social instability or drift, occurring at a life-course stage when matters such as identity formation and self-realization are especially important (Arnett 2004). Such releases, moreover, are not specific to future offenders and/or violent extremists but a rather generic feature of late adolescence and emerging adulthood in a majority of Western democratic societies (e.g. Arnett 2004).

**Interactions with individuals in proximity to the group**

If an individual is to engage in a violent extremist group, s/he needs to gain access to such a group through interacting with others. As demonstrated by Tom below, being available and seeking contact is rarely enough. Instead, affiliations are needed.

Tom: I had nothing to do. [After the parents’ divorce] I was alone and isolated in my room, you know. I felt really bad. But I had heard [on the news] that there was this group, Antifa, who hunted nazis. So I wrote to them on their web page, like ‘Help me, there are nazis at my school, I’m being beaten and bullied by them because I’m from [country]’. Nothing happened. No reply. Just silence.

The process of affiliation is informed by the stages of late adolescence and emerging adulthood in two ways. Firstly, the contingencies of drift and instability characterizing these life-course stages have made such interactions possible. Second, relative to other
age groups, Barry and Abo-Zena (2015: 469) note, at this time, peer affiliations tend to be fluid but often of a ‘high quality’ and important sources of meaning. Emerging adults engage in greater exploration of and commitment to their beliefs and practices, in part a result of their peers’ beliefs and practices (Barry et al. 2015). This notion is anchored in the interviewees’ narratives of engagement. Consider Isa, who first identified as a Muslim around the age of 12 but did not begin to ‘practice’ Islam until 18 through a group of childhood friends whom he revisited and once again became close with after his sports career stalled.

Isa: And it’s through these people that I get into a more religious group, you could say. And its, later it’s from there too, where it’s like a springboard to another group of people. And then you’re in. ... But they [his childhood friends] have nothing to do with that, and they’re against this other thing. So it’s a little complex, how I get from them to that.

Thus, the individual may initially have no direct link to the violent extremist group but encounter it as s/he moves along such chains. In Matza’s words, the individual is in ‘a gradual process of movement … guided gently by underlying influences’ (1964: 28), influences with origins in both individual biography and wider, life-course mechanisms:

Ashar: Previously, these things hadn’t seemed so important. But now, you know, I was 20, I was thinking a lot about who I was, what I thought about things. And I started spending time with these people [a local group of acquaintances] who used to eat at the same restaurant [as I did]. One of them had another thing going on too, like, a more, you could say radical idea. Through him, I got to know this other [Jihadi] group. ... And you know, it’s not, it’s just that I was at this age where I found these things very interesting. I thought they were interesting, so I gravitated toward them. Maybe because of my story, you know, being from [Middle-East country] and so on, and my experiences in Sweden. But it was just … it’s like, in my brain, these issues were very, how can I say, lit up.

Whereas the first step of this pathway had its roots in relatively generic features of modern Western society, the remaining path towards engagement is developed through interactions contingent on both biography and the individual’s location in social structure. For the process to proceed, however, the individual needs to be willing and able to respond to the group through interaction. Consider the below extract from our interview with Isa. The three groups—his childhood friends, the more religious group, and ‘another group of people’—constitute a chain along which he can move, and as he does so, something changes:

Isa: You began to feel, I don’t know, but this childhood friend of mine, or this group of friends, we began going to this other group [of practicing Muslims]. ... And there you meet some new people, and you begin to think other things than what the [majority in the group] does. You think that ‘this is not for me, they are too soft’, or too, they don’t follow what’s written, basically. They have a different interpretation, what you consider an adjusted interpretation of the message. Considering the original source, you find that this, this is a distorted version suited for the West. That’s how you begin to think. Because you meet people in this group who, you come to understand, think like I do. They are like-minded, they don’t think that this group is any good, either. And then, you move over to them, this small group with these people, you could say. ... You share opinions, you talk, you [develop your own views]. And then, someone in this small group knows someone in the [jihadi] core, and they sometimes hang out, so that’s what happens. ... And then you’re in, basically. You’re in the gang. And there’re big players in this group.
Interviewer: How do you mean, big players?
Isa: Ah, but you know, people who have travelled [to Syria/Iraq] and come back, for example.

To enter the ‘circle’ of the local, Jihadi core, one has to be permitted entry. This is accomplished by interacting with people who are already, to some extent, inside of that circle and by subsequently being introduced to what Isa terms ‘the gang’. Importantly, as we can see in Isa’s extract, willingness is not equal to propensity. In the group of practicing Muslims, Isa first meets ‘some new people’ who make him ‘think other things’, and his interaction with the group increases as he understands that there are ‘people in this group who …/ think like I do’. Isa’s willingness is thus partly a result of those he interacts with. Propensity and social influence become ‘inextricably linked’ (McGloin and Thomas 2017: 183):

Interviewer: So how did you end up with them, eventually?
Tom: Long story, actually [laughs]. So, I had developed this interest in injustices and prejudices in general, not just because of my own /…/ experiences, but also from travelling to my [country of birth] and seeing how different that society was. So I started going to these demonstrations [in Sweden], like general, for refugees, social justice, that kind of thing. And there I met with one of the organizers, who knew someone, and he introduced me to these … people who knew these antifascist groups. And at that point, as I started to hang out with them and listen to them, think about myself in relation to them, I got interested. You know, I had just wanted their help. But now I thought that maybe I could be part of what they were doing. They hunted nazis, and I wanted to do that too.

While Tom had initially ‘just wanted their help’, through interaction, he also ‘got interested’ and started a process of self-reflection and deliberation where he ‘thought that maybe I could be part of what they were doing’—an idea which had not been there before interaction begun.

Across our sample of interviewees, in line with previous studies (e.g. Kimmel 2018), we uncover more similarity than difference across different forms of extremism. By affiliating with new groups of people, the individual can thus make further ties to others, a chain of interaction through which s/he ‘grapples with [the group], considers their beliefs, tries their style, anticipates or imagines the place he will have among them’ and locates a possible self within the group (Matza 1969: 106).

**Meaning-making in relation to the group and one’s identity**

Through interaction, the individual also becomes embedded in a process of meaning-making in relation to the group; as can be seen in the interview extract with Khaula below, it involves the definition of one’s history, present situation and future.

Khaula: I’ve wanted to die like a hero, you know, like a martyr. Not necessarily for this cause, but for a cause. Doing something meaningful. And this was like that.

Interviewer: And did you see it like that from the beginning? I mean, when you first started to spend time with them?
Khaula: No, no, it took some time. You spend time with them and try to think about who you are, you know, what you can do. What you need to do. You begin to think like that, I think that’s pretty normal when you are at that age and meet a new group of people, like, ‘What’s my place here? Do I belong here?’, you know what I mean? It didn’t happen overnight. It happened gradually. Not that I wanted
to die, I don't mean that, but, if I were to die, I felt that [that] would be a good way to do it. I was only like nineteen, twenty, and that occupied a great deal of my thinking.

Emerging adulthood often represents an opportunity to turn one's life around, and ‘some people make choices that are unwise or unlucky’ (Arnett 2004: 206). Being valuable in the eyes of the group—and seeing value in the group—provides a new meaning and sense of purpose, as part of a larger life-course process of developing one's emerging, adult identity. The process of engagement hinges on the individual being not only biographically available and in affiliation with a certain group but on the subjective and social changes occurring to the individual throughout this interactional process; s/he must come to see himself or herself in a partly new light:

**Eric:** I hung out with people who were like me. I mean, in the sense that they were tough and hard and you came into a new group and made new friends, who were very vigorous and powerful. /.../ They liked that I was a big guy, and I was tough, I was violent. I think they liked that. /.../ Out in the street, if something happened, they called on me. So it was, I was just supposed to be there. I was appreciated there. /.../ I enjoyed that, my feelings had [finally] found an outlet and I really enjoyed this, back then. And I felt even stronger, I felt even more strongly about this, I was very, my self-confidence was really high. [Through these people] I got to know myself more, what I was capable of. It was as if, I felt great, it was as if I had spread my wings.

As narrative-based understandings of crime have shown, narratives are shaped by experience—but also shape experience (Maruna 2001; Presser 2009). Throughout the process of interaction, what unfolds is the adoption of a certain narrative which informs the interviewee’s worldview and, thus, obstructs certain actions while facilitating others. Such narratives also tend to involve a story of the self. In the extract with Isa below, we see how his long-lasting disdain for the United States (and more generally, the West) acquired a new meaning. It now became framed within a larger narrative of the oppression of Muslims, where resistance—and the promise of a ‘new Golden Age’ of Islam, with a more meaningful human existence—could be found in the group (e.g. Nilsson 2015). Such narratives, it should be noted, differ between forms of extremism, in the sense that each form draws from different cultural interpretations of what the world is like and what should be done to correct it. Compared to Islamic extremism, e.g. right-wing extremism has a very different worldview and narrative: “Whatever shit you have been through, you experienced all of that because of the immigrants and the Jews, and the corrupt system.” That’s the story, basically’, Eric said. ‘And I really felt that. I came to live by that.’ The individual’s emotional and experiential history, thus, comes to be framed within the group’s ideological narrative:

**Isa:** [When the conflict in Syria breaks out], is it my duty? Is it my duty as a Muslim to go down to Syria and help, to fight, provide money, is it my duty? I ask a lot. A lot of people, guest lecturers who come here from other countries. I ask them ‘Is it my duty to go down to Syria?’ I ask all the people I trust, all the people who’ve read Islam theologically. I ask them, ‘Is it my duty?’ And they say ‘No, it’s not your duty. They don’t need you as a person, flesh, blood. They need money, maybe, help with food, stuff like that.’ That’s what they say. But it doesn’t seem right to me.

As Wabid said, when asked about the significance of Salafism for him as a young man, ‘Salafism is really simple. It explains what life is about’. At this time in life, such explanations are both sought after and actively explored, as emerging adulthood is
characterized by the active trying out and commitment of lifestyle, ideology, love and work (Arnett 2004: 161). As life tends to become more centred on the group, its relationships, activities and strategies for achieving its goal, what is at stake is, thus, a certain redefinition of parts of the self, its capacities, its place in the world and its project.

Acquiring vocabularies of violence

A crucial dimension of this process involves taking on a set of vocabularies of motive making certain otherwise illicit actions possible (Mills 1940; Sykes and Matza 1957). Such vocabularies not only shape identity and self-images but also ‘actively shape future actions as we seek to behave in ways that correspond with our self-myths’ (Maruna and Matravers 2007: 431). The significance of these processes become most apparent when analysing the interviewees’ choices of words with regard to violence. In order to engage in violence, the individual has to find ways to ‘blunt the moral force of the law and neutralize the guilt of criminal participation’ (Maruna and Copes 2005: 230).

‘They don’t call it violence’, Frede said about the Nordic Resistance Movement. ‘It’s a fight, a noble thing, you know, fighting to defend something’. Although the individual may have the capacity, even desire for violence, it must be exercised under certain circumstances: ‘I had a rule, never [to be violent] against someone who hadn’t done anything to me’, Eric said. ‘Never. That was a rule which, I didn’t provoke any, never any innocent. That was a rule to me’.

Like Frede, the other interviewees do not speak of their actions in the group in terms of violence. Instead, they express themselves in terms of ‘struggle’, ‘battle’, ‘fight’, ‘war’ and ‘resistance’, a vocabulary they acquire as they become more embedded in the group. For the violent extremist group, there exists a legitimate hostile target, a rejection of the state as a legitimate authority and a commitment to a higher loyalty making certain forms of violence justifiable and, therefore, possible. Left-wing groups attack ‘nazis’ and ‘fascists’, right-wing groups attack ‘reds’ and ‘commies’ and the violent Islamic groups protects and fights for ‘true Muslims’. ‘They have a belief that this is right’, Damir said, referring to Islamic extremism. ‘So you don’t consider it as something [wrong], there’s no shame in what you do, like, in that way. There isn’t. But you consistently avoid attacking Muslims. You can’t do that’.

The individual develops an understanding of the group’s significance, its place in the world and the significance and meaning of the violent act, in turn making this action possible. To the extent that ideological and/or religious radicalization has bearing on this process, it is primarily as a kind of meaning-making unfolding through interaction. As Alimi et al. (2015: 15) note in their study of radicalization, ‘Ideas and intentions … acquire their consequentiality as they are intertwined with the relational, interactive frameworks that envelope political contention [in the group]’. The development of ideological and/or religious motivations, thus, constitute no intrinsic problem for criminological analyses (see Cottee 2014 for a discussion of criminology’s alleged shortcomings in this regard); rather, our analysis suggests that we can approach and understand these motivations in much the same way criminology approaches (criminal) motivation in general. It unfolds and is given meaning through daily interactions with others and in relation to the individual’s needs, wills and prospects. The use of such scripts, or neutralizations, are partly conditioned by age; while they ‘may promote’
crime in adolescence and emerging adulthood, they seem to ‘have no great impact on adult criminal behavior’ (Maruna and Copes 2005: 277). Instead, they are part of larger processes of identity construction and self-making, processes particularly imminent and pertinent in this stage of the life-course (Benson and Elder 2011).

Having come this far in the process, the individual may already have committed a number of crimes as part of the group or he may be at the ‘invitational edge’ to do so (Matza 1969: 117). In 2014, Isa, taking his cues from other people in the group, left Sweden for Syria:

**Interviewer:** So tell me about the trip. How did you come up with, I mean, how did it start?

**Isa:** It was a duty for me to travel down [to Syria]. I had to travel down. I want to, uh, I want to die too, become a martyr. I wanted to go down there, I wanted to fight for my religion. So, yeah. It’s an easy choice when you’re in that state of mind, if you put it that way. It’s an easy choice, it’s not because you’re a blood-thirsty person who wants to kill people, it’s, it’s just an easy choice considering the [state] you’re in.

Whether or not it actually is a religious duty may be a contested theological question (e.g. Nilsson 2015) of relevance for many—here, it is not. What is significant, however, is that Isa had undergone a process throughout which he came to perceive it as such a duty. As noted by Roy (2017: 51), within the violent extremist group, narratives of violence become ‘structured as arguments that describe and justify, as if the crime could not achieve its full impact until it was transformed into a discourse on itself’.

**Discussion**

Despite the robust empirical finding that a majority of those who engage in violent extremism are relatively young, age has been an understudied and undertheorized dimension of such processes. When models of radicalization are the subject of critique, their neglect of age as an important factor is rarely mentioned (e.g. Walklate and Mythen 2018; Ahmad and Monaghan 2019). In this study, we utilized a set of life-course criminological tools to explore individual-level engagement in violent extremism in late adolescence and emerging adulthood. Moving away from individualistic and policy-oriented theories, this study instead suggests the intricate intersections of biography, social context and life-course contingent dynamics of both group- and self-narratives as a fruitful approach to understand why, how and when people come to engage in such behaviours.

In a context of qualitative criminological research, our sample is small, making inferences beyond the sample highly uncertain. When it comes to violent extremism, however, most studies using primary interviews as their empirical material have been restricted to an even lower sample size (exceptions exist, of course, but they are few, e.g. Simi et al. 2016). The characteristics of the sample may also limit the scope of our findings: it consists almost exclusively of males born during the 1980s and early 1990s, living in the larger cities of Sweden, with experiences of far-right or Islamic extremism. Our sole left-wing case, and only female interviewee, we acknowledge, severely restrict our ability to draw any conclusions regarding female or left-wing engagement. That being said, our task in this paper has been to explore people’s pathways into violent extremism using life-course criminological tools and elements from narrative criminology (e.g. Kale and Brinkmann 2008); it has not been to test the generalizability or inferential abilities of our findings. Our findings do, however, go in line with what previous studies have found (e.g. LaFree et al. 2018). Our contribution lies in an ordering and linking of these perspectives as the individual’s pathway unfolds over time.
Whereas the steps towards engagement seems to be more characterized by similarity than difference across various forms of extremism, there may of course be important differences between individuals who engage with right-wing, left-wing and Islamic groups. For example, as noted, right-wing and Islamic extremism subscribe to different outlooks on and narratives of the world. If, as a life-course perspective claims, an individual’s life-course results from an intersection of biography and structure, some may be more open to consider the validity of a given narrative than are others. In future theorizing about the processes of individual-level engagement in violent extremism, a deepened understanding of these dynamics should be a high priority. Doing so allows the researcher to access the larger, cultural interpretations and narrative identities that can motivate, maintain, obstruct or restrain engagement in violent extremism (Sandberg 2016).

Additionally, the meanings of age, and the life-course stages of late adolescence and emerging adulthood in particular, should be given analytic attention but not necessarily as predictors. As such, we know, they are quite weak (Monahan 2017). Instead, age may be understood in a broader sense as a proxy for other important life-course changes which can facilitate the steps towards engagement. Importantly, several well-known pushes and pulls of violent extremism were observable in the narratives, including structural, interactional and individual factors. Alone, empirically, they serve as bad predictors for engagement (Monahan 2017). However, as this paper shows, they are not unimportant. On the contrary, in order to understand these factors, it is useful to study them as embedded in life-course processes. When a person with such experiences undergoes a sequence of weakened social control and subsequent interactional processes, push and pull factors can become highly salient, as they tend to be framed within a larger, ideological or religious narrative with strong connotations to the self at a stage in life where such connotations are especially important.

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