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Polarisation, radicalisation and social policy: evaluating the theories of change

Vasco Lub

This article evaluates the validity of 'theories of change' of anti-polarisation and anti-radicalisation interventions. Assumptions of four dominant social policies are confronted with the literature. In addition, epistemological issues are discussed. Notions of 'what works and why', do not equate to straightforward application. Also, the potential of the four policy approaches depends in great measure on their conceptualisation of 'polarisation' or 'radicalisation'. A focus on interventions could be dismissed as naive, when no account is offered of wider sociopolitical factors fuelling radicalisation or ethnic tensions. The interaction between these two notions is a relevant topic for future research.

Introduction

Throughout Western Europe, polarisation and radicalisation are frequent topics of discussion and study. Polarisation can be described as a sharpening of divisions between groups that share certain social, cultural or religious traits. Radicalisation refers to a process whereby citizens, starting from a serious discontent, develop thoughts or plans to disrupt the existing social or political order using violence or intimidation. In the Netherlands, government interest in radicalisation seems to have diminished over the last few years (in the absence of terrorist attacks). Polarisation, on the other hand, can rejoice in a growing interest (see, for example, RMO, 2009). According to some, there is a widening social and cultural gap between immigrant and native populations and between minority ethnic groups themselves (van den Brink, 2006; SCP, 2009). Notten and Witte (2011: 61) argue that not radicalisation, but polarisation is the 'real problem' in the Netherlands.

After the murder of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh by the Muslim radical Mohammed B., riots by right-wing extremist youth and clashes between migrant youth in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, various methods have been designed to counter polarisation and radicalisation tendencies. Currently, the Dutch government funds dozens of social policy interventions in this area (Lub, 2009). These include:

- empowerment training for 'vulnerable young Muslims';
- personal and social support programmes for right-wing extremists;
- peer mediation in group conflicts;
- dialogue activities for young people of different ethnic origins, religions or subcultures.

Key words polarisation • radicalisation • theory-driven evaluation • social policy

Many of these interventions resemble local social policy measures in other European countries. Germany, Norway and Sweden have prolific experience in dealing with right-wing extremist youth groups and mainly target these issues through social support services and 'exit' programmes (Englund, 2002; Bjørge et al, 2005; Rommelspacher, 2006). In France and the United Kingdom (UK), radicalisation of second-generation immigrant Muslims, as well as cultural clashes between underprivileged minority youth groups, have prompted governments to sponsor moderate religious alternatives for at-risk youth or provide programmes that aim to foster a sense of social cohesion (Bouzar, 2006; Brighton, 2007).

It remains unclear, however, whether underlying assumptions of social policy against polarisation and radicalisation are valid and whether the policy measures achieve their intended outcome. Evaluations of measures in the field of polarisation and radicalisation are scarce or hardly meet scientific standards. This leaves many questions about the effectiveness and legitimacy of the designed social interventions unanswered. How susceptible are Muslim youth to religious radicalism and what does their level of self-esteem have to do with this? How effective are peers in mediating in intergroup conflicts? Are right-wing extremists indeed 'softened up' by improving their personal problems and social living conditions? And does intergroup contact between hostile youth groups promote mutual understanding and cause a decrease of animosity, and if so, under what circumstances?

This article evaluates the validity of causal mechanisms implicit in social policy interventions in the field of polarisation and radicalisation, by confronting them with scientific evidence from the literature.¹ For this purpose, a theory-driven evaluation perspective was used. The defining principle of any theory-driven approach is that assumptions of social interventions are made explicit and are scrutinised for their validity (Chen and Rossi, 1983; Chen, 1990; see also Shadish, 1987; Lipsey, 1993; Weiss, 1995). Each social intervention is based on certain assumptions about what effect it should yield and what causal mechanisms should bring about the intended change. Put together, these assumed causal pathways constitute a theory of change. By examining the extent to which these policy theories are supported by scientific evidence, the potential effectiveness of specific methods can be predicted more reliably. Many interventions against polarisation, for example, focus on intercultural dialogue techniques, bringing together youngsters from different ethnic origins or religions. The underlying principle, broadly rooted in the contact hypothesis of Allport (1954), is that communication will lead to reduced prejudice. But is this assumption plausible? At first glance, it seems self-evident that bridging contact leads to more tolerance towards 'the other'. Yet it is equally conceivable that it yields a negative effect. Perhaps negative stereotypes between groups are confirmed by the contact, through which mutual tensions could increase instead of decrease, a process described in conflict theories by Campbell (1965) and Sherif (1966).

Conceptualisations and research questions

Earlier surveys show that almost all Dutch interventions described in the field of polarisation and radicalisation can be linked to four themes, which overlap with social

policy measures in other European countries (Lub et al, 2011). The present study evaluates the validity of their theories of change. The four types of intervention are:

- *Social ecological interventions*: These interventions aim to prevent or counter extremist behaviour of young people by offering support within their social ecological context (family, peers, school, work). They apply a coherent method of social support with a focus on problematic family relations, associations with negative peers ('wrong friends'), performance at school, adequacy of housing and perspective on work. The approach resembles multi-systemic therapy, designed for juvenile offenders (Borduin, 1995; Henggeler et al, 1996), and mainly targets right-wing extremist youth.
- *Peer mediation*: The premise of peer mediation is that young people are better equipped to remove tensions and mediate in conflicts between hostile youth groups than (adult) professionals.
- *Intergroup contact interventions*: These interventions are designed to increase tolerance between young people of different ethnic origins, religions or subcultures. Their purpose is to promote mutual understanding and remove (potential) animosity and to challenge stereotypes or prejudice. Intergroup contact interventions often include activities such as role plays or exercises in debate techniques.
- *Self-esteem enhancement*: This is geared towards 'empowering' supposed mentally vulnerable youths, perceived as susceptible to radicalism. These types of interventions usually provide individual counselling programmes or empowerment training for groups of adolescents from minority ethnic groups.

It is important to note that a particular 'theory of change' of a given intervention does not refer to a social theory in the general scientific sense. Instead, it comprises a set of causal assumptions and mechanisms (pathways), which are implicitly bound up in a given policy intervention or social programme (Weiss, 1995). However, the intervention theories of the respective policy approaches central to this article do display similarities with conventional social scientific theory. The social ecological approach and peer mediation can be traced to the social bond theory derived from criminology (see Hirschi, 1969). This emphasises an absence of social attachments among juvenile delinquents, whereby attachment to families, commitment to social norms and institutions (school, employment) and involvement in mainstream activities are believed to be important starting points for behavioural change (see Hirschi, 1969: 16). Underlying assumptions of intergroup contact interventions overlap with the contact hypothesis, first articulated by Allport (1954). Allport's theory states that interpersonal contact is an effective way to reduce prejudice or hostility between members of different (sub)cultures or ethnicities, and such ideas form the basis of introductory activities for hostile youth. Finally, the similarities between self-esteem enhancement and social identity theory are apparent. Social identity theory states that a significant portion of an individual's self-concept derives from perceived membership of a relevant social group (see Tajfel and Turner, 1986). In the context of radicalisation issues, this notion strongly resembles dominant government assumptions that immigrant (Muslim) youth often lack a sense of social belonging in the wider

society (alienation) and as a result struggle with their identity and are more vulnerable to radical thoughts or influence by radical people.

Note that the different social policy approaches to addressing polarisation and radicalisation overlap in some conceptual areas, but draw dividing lines in others (see Table 1). The social ecological approach and peer mediation, for example, have similar theoretical roots but differ in their conception of polarisation/radicalisation. Social ecological interventions perceive these problems predominantly as deviant behaviour by youths, while peer mediation is more geared towards group conflict. Intergroup contact can also be categorised in the framework of group conflicts, but peer mediation and intergroup contact approaches do not share their theoretical underpinnings in the scientific sense (social bond theory versus contact hypothesis).

Table 1: Conceptualisations of social policy approaches to addressing polarisation and radicalisation

Policy approach	Overlap with scientific theory	Conception of polarisation/ radicalisation	Assumed key to success
Social ecological	Social bond theory	Individual pathology	Social support
Peer mediation	Social bond theory	Group conflict	Peer influence
Intergroup contact	Contact hypothesis	Group conflict	Mutual understanding
Self-esteem enhancement	Social identity theory	Alienation	Empowerment

As is clear from Table 1, scientific theories and policy theories can overlap and they are indeed often discussed interchangeably. From an analytical standpoint, however, they can be quite different. Often scientific theories obtain a different meaning when they are translated into policy interventions. In other cases, the boundaries between scientific theories and policy theories are not clear to begin with and an intervention theory does not necessarily have to fall back on a scientific underpinning at all. Considering the policy approach of the study, this article is more concerned with intervention theories than with scientific theory. The divergence in overlap with scientific theory, conceptions of polarisation/radicalisation and assumed keys to success is also why the four themes have specifically been studied as four distinct approaches.

In the last few decades, the fields of social psychology and the humanities have yielded valuable insights into identity formation, cognitive processes related to intolerance, stereotyping of groups and mechanisms that trigger violent and antisocial behaviour by youths. This enables the consultation of a wide variety of literature to establish whether implicit policy theories on what works against polarisation/radicalisation, as well as how and why they work, have any plausible basis. Indirectly, such an investigation also sheds light on to what extent more general social theoretical notions (such as the contact hypothesis and social bond theory) are applicable in the context of polarisation and radicalisation. The research questions read as follows:

- To what extent are underlying causal mechanisms implicit in social policy in the field of polarisation and radicalisation supported by scientific evidence?
- What particular assumptions can be considered valid or invalid according to the literature?
- What implications does the knowledge gained have for future polarisation/radicalisation policy?
- What are the epistemological potentials or shortcomings of a theory-driven perspective in this area?

Methodology

Within the field of social programme evaluation, theory-driven evaluation has become increasingly associated with qualitative action research (see, for example, Weiss, 1995; Green and McAllister, 2002). In such qualitative-oriented, theory-based approaches, the plausibility of underlying theories is usually gauged on the basis of experiences of practitioners. The goal is to determine the nature and meaning of the intervention to uncover information on how and why a particular outcome should be achieved or not achieved. The present study deviates from the qualitative theory-based approaches in a number of ways.

First, the treatment models of the different polarisation/radicalisation interventions were not specified at length. Instead, the most defining underlying principle of a particular form of intervention was extracted along with the postulated relationships between the assumed 'working' components. For this purpose, generalisations (ideal types) of the various forms of interventions and their underlying assumptions were constructed (Weber, 1971 [1951]; see also Ritzer, 1992). Second, instead of interviewing practitioners, the programme theories were reconstructed by analysis of written documents, such as programme descriptions of professional and civic organisations, government position papers and strategy outlines of funding agencies. Finally, and most importantly, the 'action research' component of qualitative theory-based approaches, which views stakeholders as relevant sources of information on 'what works, how and why', was omitted. By contrast, existing, peer-reviewed scientific literature as the standard of comparison was focused upon. Quantitative impact studies (meta-analyses, experimental research and longitudinal studies), but also rigorous (peer-reviewed) qualitative research, served as the quintessential touchstone.

To review the theories of change, the international literature was systematically searched. The scientific resources and impact assessments had to be related to one of the four themes and the assumed underlying causal assumptions. No restrictions were made in terms of publication date and size of the study. The literature yielded over 150 relevant international studies and impact assessments, mostly from Europe and North America. Whether the identified studies are representative of all studies conducted in this area is not known. Not all research useful to the study may have been published. We assume, however, that the literature we collected contains the most relevant insights, partly because during the research, academic experts were consulted on the various topics.

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Evaluating the theories of change²

The social ecological approach

Social ecological interventions comprise methods that aim to prevent or counter extremist behaviour of young people by offering help within their social ecological context (family, peers, school, work). These interventions apply a coherent method of social support with a focus on problematic family relations, associations with negative peers ('wrong friends'), performance at school, adequacy of housing and perspective on work. The approach resembles multi-systemic therapy, designed for juvenile offenders (Borduin et al, 1995; Henggeler et al, 1996). The underlying assumed working mechanism is that by enhancing the social ties of radical youths and their relationship to their broader social environment, personal problems are minimised and feelings of social deprivation are reduced. This should in turn reduce the (risk of) radical behaviour. In Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia, this approach has been applied widely to right-wing extremist youth. The ideal-typical assumptions and causal pathway of the social ecological approach are provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Ideal typical assumptions and causal pathways Social Ecological Approach



Effect studies show that a social ecological approach is effective against socially problematic behaviour of young people and generally yields better results than alternative treatment programmes (Curtis et al, 2004; Borduin et al, 2009). At-risk young people who undergo such an intervention show a decrease in antisocial behaviour, violence and criminal activities. The efficacy of a social ecological approach is explained by the fact that problematic behaviour of young people is contained by improving and strengthening family ties, thus increasing the problem-solving ability of the family. This makes the prevalence of other negative impact factors (eg, criminal friends) less likely.

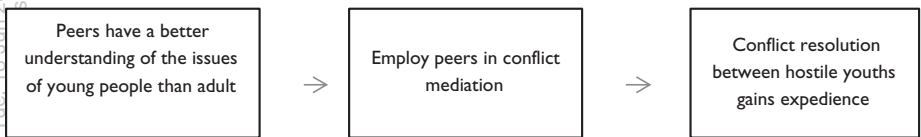
Case studies from Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden indicate that social ecological interventions also increase the chance of a 'normal life' of extremist youth – in much the same way as it does with young criminal offenders (Englund, 2002; Bjørge et al, 2005; Rommelspacher, 2006; Demant et al, 2009). By applying a consistent treatment, radical and at-risk youth can improve their personal living conditions and strengthen their social ties outside their radical circle. This, in turn, can lead to a steady decline in extremist behaviour and withdrawal out of radical movements. It is difficult to say whether this applies to both right-wing 'white' extremist youth and young immigrant Muslim radicals. Most of the reported successful cases apply to right-wing extremists. However, it is certain that the approach works

mainly with young hangers-on and less on hard-core radicals. Empirical results furthermore do not clarify whether a normal life of radicalised individuals also leads to an *ideological* change. It is not assured that when a radical young person improves their social living conditions and changes their lifestyle, this automatically leads to a renunciation of radical ideas.

Peer mediation

The premise of peer mediation is that young people are employed to remove tensions and mediate in conflicts between hostile youth groups. The underlying assumption of peer mediation is that peer mediators are a natural part of the social environment of young people, therefore have a better understanding of the issues of other young people, and consequently exert a stronger influence on them than adult professionals (see, for example, CCV, 2010, and SMN, 2008, in the Netherlands; and the Peer Mediation Network, in the UK). In many European countries, this line of thinking speaks to the imagination of both administrators and policy makers. The ideal-typical assumptions and causal pathway of peer mediation are provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Ideal typical assumptions and causal pathways Peer Mediation



Our investigation into the potency of peer mediation produced a diffuse picture. According to available scientific effect studies on school-based peer mediation (mostly from the United States), mediation by peers – in most cases – dilutes polarised relationships and conflicts between young people (for a systematic review, see Jones, 2004). The causal link, however, between the employment of young people and the positive outcome of peer mediation remains to be established. As far as we can derive from the literature, there are no studies available that systematically compare similar mediation methods with different mediators (peers versus adults). It is therefore unclear whether the benefits of peer mediation are *caused* by the fact that the mediation is performed by peers. Other, less imaginative, factors might be responsible for the positive results, such as the close attention that is given to the causes and consequences of the conflict itself. As yet, there is no scientific basis for the theory that when at-risk youth are supervised by someone from their ‘own group’, this yields a more favourable result than when they are mediated by someone who is supposedly socially or mentally farther removed from them, such as an adult professional. It also appears that adolescents who are specifically trained as mediators benefit most from this approach. Some comparative and longitudinal studies show that they significantly improve their conflict resolution and social skills due to the training and professional support they receive. Yet a positive impact of peer mediation on the mediated youths is much smaller and in many cases even absent (see, for example, Jones, 1997; Lane-Garon, 2000; Bickmore, 2002).

Intergroup contact

To reduce polarisation, interventions have been designed that aim to improve contact and increase tolerance between young people of different ethnic origins, religions or subcultures. Their purpose is to promote mutual understanding, remove (potential) animosity and challenge stereotypes or prejudice. In the Netherlands, intergroup contact interventions often include activities such as role plays or exercises in debate techniques. The central assumption underlying this approach is that hostility towards other people can result from ignorance about 'the other'. The ideal-typical assumptions and causal pathway of intergroup contact are provided in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Ideal typical assumptions and causal pathways Intergroup Contact

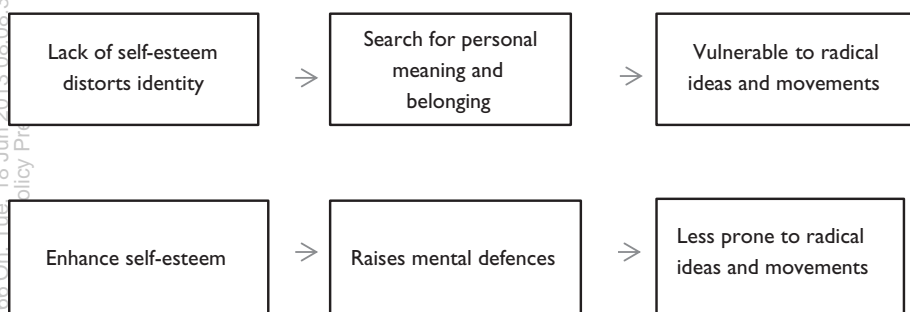


Meta-analyses by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006, 2008) indeed show that, on average, prejudices and stereotypes about other groups are significantly reduced by intergroup contact. But there are several caveats. The impact of the positive effect is generally small. Reported effect sizes of the association between intergroup contact and reduction of prejudice in the meta-analyses of Pettigrew and Tropp range between $-.204$ and $-.225$ (Pearson correlation r). In social scientific research, such correlation values generally are considered to be small (see Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006: 756, 757). Second, there is no real evidence for a long-term impact, that is, it is uncertain whether positive results of the contact (eg, improved relations or reduced stereotypes) extend beyond the immediate aftermath of the intervention. Third, positive effects of intergroup contact cannot automatically be generalised to interethnic contact between adolescents, especially in the school environment. A review by Lindo (2008) shows that many empirical studies in this area report mixed results in prejudice reduction between minority and majority groups (see, for example, Cook, 1985; Eshel and Dicker, 1995; McClenehan et al, 1996; Molina and Wittig, 2006). Some studies even report no significant results or a *negative* effect of the contact (see, for example, Bullock 1976; Vornberg and Grant, 1976; Wagner et al, 1989; Bradnum et al, 1993). A final point of reservation is that the majority of the studies that do report benefits of interethnic youth contact are unable to pinpoint the causal direction of the determined effect. Few investigations in this area have a design based on which a judgement can be made about causation. In other words, it remains largely unclear whether the interethnic contact between young people causes a more positive image about other ethnic groups, or whether a positive image was already present, which in turn established the interethnic contact.

Self-esteem enhancement

Many anti-radicalisation interventions are geared towards enhancing the self-esteem of mentally vulnerable adolescents. These types of interventions usually provide individual counselling programmes or empowerment training for groups of adolescents from minority ethnic groups. In the Netherlands, self-esteem enhancement is particularly used for preventing radicalisation among Muslim youth. The dominant assumption of Dutch government officials and policy makers is that immigrant Muslim youth often struggle with their identity. As a result they are assumed to be more vulnerable to radical thoughts or influence by radical people (see, for example, Dutch Home Office, 2008; SMN, 2008). The ideal-typical assumptions and causal pathway of self-esteem enhancement are provided in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Ideal typical assumptions and causal pathways Self-esteem Enhancement



Several authors highlight a link between radicalisation and the formation of identity and self-image, a matter that is supposedly especially apparent during adolescence (see, for example, Vertovec and Rogers, 1999; Phalet, 2003; Heitmeyer and Sitzer, 2008). Some argue that developing a positive self-image is important for developing self-esteem (eg, Harter, 2003) and, in the case of immigrant youth, a sense of social belonging and meaning (eg, Heitmeyer et al, 1997). The assumption of Western-European governments is therefore that young people are vulnerable in this respect, and in their quest for personal meaning have a greater chance of coming into contact with radical movements because these movements offer an ideology that responds to their life questions.

The theory, however, shows problematic premises. First, the indefinable nature of the target group stands out. Which Muslim youth can be labelled as mentally 'vulnerable'? And why is mental vulnerability (and its antonym: mental resilience) primarily associated with Islamic radicalism? Among native 'white' youth, generally no greater receptiveness to right-wing extremism is assumed in the case of a disruption of the self-image or low self-esteem. The more fundamental question of whether young people with low self-esteem – Muslim or not Muslim – are more

susceptible to radicalisation or more prone to join radical movements is difficult to answer. The scientific research is inconclusive about the supposed benefits of self-esteem enhancement to socially desirable behaviour. In fact, there is substantial evidence that interventions that unilaterally aim to boost self-esteem encourage narcissism, aggressiveness or antisocial behaviour (see, for example, Baumeister et al, 1996; Heatherton and Vohs, 2000; [Stucke and Sporer, 2002](#); [Donnellan et al, 2005](#)). Moreover, several studies report that young people with relatively high levels of self-esteem show greater in-group bias ([Crocker et al, 1987](#); [Verkuyten, 1996](#); [Aberson et al, 2000](#)). Young people with a higher self-confidence tend to value members of their own ethnic group more positively than members of the out-group. Boosting confidence levels of (Muslim) youth, therefore, cannot be considered a self-evident mechanism against extremism, radical thoughts or influence by radical people.

Conclusions

Table 2 provides an overview of the scientific basis of the evaluated intervention theories. It illustrates that none of the investigated policy approaches is supported by a strong scientific foundation.

Table 2: The scientific basis of social policy theories in the field of polarisation and radicalisation

Theory of change	Scientific basis				
	Weak	Moderate	Strong	Absence of evidence	Evidence of absence
Social ecological approach		✓			
Peer mediation	✓			✓	
Intergroup contact		✓			
Self-esteem enhancement	✓				✓

Social ecological approaches seem to be effective in reducing extremist behaviour in radical youth, but do not necessarily lead to an ideological change. Therefore, the scientific basis of the theory is moderate. Mediation by peers seems to exert a positive influence in conflict resolution in most cases, but the causal link between the employment of young people and positive outcomes remains unclear. Despite the many studies reporting positive effects of peer mediation, the theory in itself has a weak scientific basis. However, in this case, ‘absence of evidence’ is not ‘evidence of absence’.³ As yet, there are no experimental studies available that systematically compare similar mediation methods with different mediators (peers versus adults). Perhaps such research designs will indeed confirm that peers are the beneficial causal factor. But for now such an assumption is impossible to verify conclusively. Intergroup contact on average reduces prejudices about other groups, but effect sizes are generally small and there is no evidence for a long-term impact. Positive outcomes of intergroup contact also cannot automatically be generalised to interethnic contact

between adolescents. The theory of change underlying intergroup contact must therefore be judged as moderate.

Finally, the theory that enhancing the self-esteem of at-risk youth will prevent radicalisation has a weak scientific basis. It is doubtful that self-esteem enhancement makes (Muslim) youth more resilient against radical tendencies. The scientific evidence is ambiguous about whether increasing confidence levels results in socially desirable behaviour or improved social relations. In fact, most studies report negative behavioural effects as a result of one-sided mental empowerment methods. Boosting levels of self-confidence can even contribute to greater in-group bias.

The evaluation of the various theories of change yields several policy implications. Regarding the social ecological approach, the question is justified as to whether radicals who withdraw from terrorist groups and renounce violence, should also be persuaded to give up their radical beliefs. This also depends on the goal of the intervention (is the objective solely a behavioural change or also a mental change?). Still, the radical ideas of young people are not a negligible factor. Exemplary are the so-called 'London bombers', responsible for the terrorist suicide attacks in the London Underground in 2005. The four British young men of Pakistani and Jamaican descent studied or worked and were members of the local cricket club. One of them was even married and had recently become a father. Yet they were sufficiently influenced by radical messages to commit a terrorist attack. In terms of effectuating mental change, a purely social ecological approach in the treatment of radicalising youth might therefore fall short.

Encouraging responsible behaviour by family members of radical young people is a crucial success factor in establishing a mental change through social ecological approaches. Dutch case studies show that parents especially can have a negative influence on the thinking of young people prone to radical behaviour, such as when they ventilate stereotypes about other ethnic groups or propagate a message of intolerance (see, for example, Cadat and Engbersen, 2006; Pels and Vollebergh, 2006; van den Brink, 2006). This applies both to young radical Muslims and extremist right-wing youth. In some immigrant families, parents – either consciously or subconsciously – convey an anti-Western sentiment or justify similar behaviour from their children (see, for example, Werdmolder, 2005; van San, 2006). The parents of native Dutch, right-wing extremist youth often share the xenophobic ideas of their children (Cadat and Engbersen, 2006). The intention of the Dutch government to focus more on the role of parents in order to prevent the radicalisation of young people therefore seems legitimate (see Dutch Home Office Polarization and Radicalization Action Plan 2007–11).

In peer mediation, it is recommended to be cautious when it comes to conflict resolution in cultural clashes in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Adult mediators should not be replaced by peers entirely. Still little is known about whether peers are indeed the causal factor in successful school conflict resolutions, let alone if they can have a positive impact in (ethnic) clashes outside the school environment, such as the neighbourhood. The safety of mediating young people cannot be guaranteed in all conflicts, and it is conceivable that peer mediators will not always be able to make a constructive contribution in serious ethnic group collisions. Case studies show that conflict gradations can determine the outcome of peer mediation significantly (see,

for example, Cohen, 1999). In the later stages of a conflict in which both sides make a hardening stand, the likelihood that informal mediation offers solace diminishes. If peer mediation is considered in contexts outside the school environment, it is therefore more likely to contribute in conflicts that are in their early stages and have not yet escalated.

In intergroup contact, reducing feelings of uncertainty about the contact with members of groups that are perceived as different, turns out to be an important precondition for contact situations (see, for example, Blascovich et al, 2000; Mendes et al, 2002; Shelton and Richeson, 2005, 2006). When this condition is not met during introductory activities, it could potentially result in further alienation. This might explain some of the mixed results of interethnic contact reported by some studies. Naturally, this finding is at odds with organising random familiarisation sessions for young people in order to reduce (potential) prejudice, and signifies the importance of thorough professional supervision. The present evaluation of the empirical research on intergroup contact also sheds light on other conditions that can optimise its effect. It is equally desirable in intergroup contact to:

- work on the basis of concrete examples and scenarios of stereotyping ([Gurin et al, 1999](#); [Finlay and Stephan, 2000](#));
- implement role plays in which young people participate in ‘perspective taking’ ([Stephan and Finlay, 1999](#));
- ensure an open discussion environment whereby moralisation on behalf of the trainers is avoided and xenophobic youth are allowed to express themselves ([Cameron et al, 2006](#); [Bekhuis et al, 2009](#));
- integrate cooperative learning techniques in which students of different ethnic backgrounds work together to solve a problem ([Cooper and Slavin, 2004](#); [Roseth et al, 2008](#)).

Finally, the assessment of self-esteem interventions implies that for young people already in the process of radicalisation, it seems useful to buffer their self-image through individual programmes rather than to increase it directly through ‘empowerment’ sessions. This ‘buffering’ entails personal values of young people being reinforced, which may attenuate aggressive reactions after the undermining of the self-image. Dutch trajectories through which radicalised Muslim youth learn to act not only religiously, but also morally, seem promising in this respect (see [Gielen, 2009](#)). Experimental research suggests that such methods remove the sharp edges of dogmatic views and may increase tolerance towards dissenters (see [Cohen et al, 2000](#); [Thomaes et al, 2009](#)).

Discussion

The present article provides insight into what plausibly works and does not work against polarisation and radicalisation issues, without costly and time-consuming evaluations needing to be conducted of separate interventions and programmes. But what works in theory does not always correspond with what works in practice. With

regard to polarisation and radicalisation, in particular, a few significant epistemological challenges should be considered.

First, one can have a detailed notion of what factors influence radical or xenophobic behaviour of young people, but this does not mean that those insights can be applied automatically in newly designed policy interventions. The studies on which the conclusions of this article are based were often very detailed and differentiated many subtle variations in behaviour and psychological dispositions. This complicates the objective of applying the particular intervention that is consistent with the 'diagnosis' of the (radical) behaviour, that is, if that diagnosis can even be made accurately. For example, it remains unclear which Muslim youth can or should be labelled as 'radical'. Some Dutch cases painfully illustrate the difficult assessment of the often subtle differences between religious orthodoxy and supposed radicalism of some Muslim youth (see [Demant et al, 2008: 58–61](#)). Also, it is one thing to conclude that, for example, the moral education of parents influences xenophobic ideas of at-risk youth; to effectively incorporate such notions in government policy is another matter. And most of the studies on intergroup contact have been conducted in the psychological laboratory. But how might we bring people together under the right conditions in everyday life (see also [Wilson, 2011](#))? These are difficult questions and insight into the possibilities of social policy can thus paradoxically also lead to an understanding of its limitations.

Second, one can question whether it is possible to make statements about the effectiveness of existing approaches solely by examining the literature. The method provides a reference point of what works, but not a recipe. From the literature, insights emerge about effective elements based on empirical findings. Whether such potential effectiveness takes shape in practice depends on a variety of social, political and administrative constraints and contextual factors (see, for example, [Pawson and Tilley, 1997](#); [Spicker, 2011](#)). However helpful, literature reviews by no means yield unequivocal policy verdicts ([Boaz and Pawson, 2005](#); see also [Chambers et al, 2012](#)). The viewpoint of confronting causal assumptions with scientific evidence from the literature can never paint a complete picture of the efforts required to address issues such as extremism and ethnic tensions. Moreover, no intervention occurs in a social vacuum. Practitioners in the field often have their own interpretation of what mechanisms ought to contribute to specified goals. The interpretations of these 'street-level bureaucrats' ([Lipsky, 1980](#)) can deviate from problem definitions and goal specifications put forth in official documents. Practitioners may narrow the goals of policy makers or elaborate upon them, or substitute entirely different goals. Such a transformation can produce a gap between the (evidence-based) design of a particular programme and its actual implementation.

Finally, although a theory-driven assessment evaluates causal assumptions of interventions and thus indirectly problematises the legitimacy of the interventions themselves, only underlying theories are tested that are considered relevant for policy analysis. This is because existing government-funded interventions constitute the starting point of inquiry. The risk, however, is that factors that may work against polarisation or radicalisation, but fall outside the analytical framework, are overlooked. While theory-driven evaluation enables a peek inside the famous 'black box' ([Astbury](#)

and Leeuw, 2010), it does not peer outside of it. In sociological systems theory, this phenomenon is known as the problem of the 'blind spot' (Luhmann, 1997). When an observer chooses a certain perspective, they are inevitably confined by this perspective. Only when the observer takes a step back to look at their own point of view, can the consequences of their original choices be critically brought to light. When it comes to tackling polarisation and radicalisation issues, then, policy analysts and researchers should not only evaluate present measures but also be willing to ask radically different questions about what could contribute to solving the problems.

The most immediate question is at what point to take into account the social context. This depends in great measure on the conceptualisation of 'polarisation' or 'radicalisation'. If these issues are conceived as treatable pathologies (as the four approaches discussed in this article tend to do), then it makes sense to focus on treatment plans (ie, 'interventions'). However, such an approach could arguably be dismissed as naive, when no account is offered of sociopolitical factors or perceived injustices fuelling radicalisation or ethnic tensions. As mentioned, the 'London Bombers' are an exemplary case. It is essential to investigate further to what extent contextual variables are essential components of interventions seeking a lasting reduction of these problems. Should, for example, in the case of social ecological approaches for Muslim youth, Imams and mosques be seen as desirable 'social attachments' or as potential detractors from mainstream society? In what way do migration factors influence the efficacy of individual counselling programmes for minority ethnic youth? And how strongly do geopolitical developments that influence domestic relations between ethnic groups hinder or accommodate endeavours to promote mutual understanding through intergroup contact? The interaction between government-induced interventions against polarisation and radicalisation and wider sociopolitical factors is a relevant topic for future research.

Notes

¹ In this article, a social policy intervention is defined as a programme, project, training method or individual counselling treatment, which comprises some degree of systematic action to achieve a predefined objective. The adjective 'social' refers to anti-polarisation and anti-radicalisation measures that are oriented towards improving the social behaviour, relations or living conditions of radical or at-risk youth.

² For purposes of readability and the length of this article, a selection was made of relevant references. For an overview of all the literature references included in the review, see Lub et al (2011).

³ Absence of evidence is the absence of, or lack of, any kind of evidence that may indicate or be used to infer a fact, in this case the confirmation of a formulated theory of change. Evidence of absence (also called 'negative evidence') is evidence that can be used to confidently infer the non-existence or non-presence of something, in this case the verity of a particular theory of change (see, for example, Johnstone, 1991).

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