

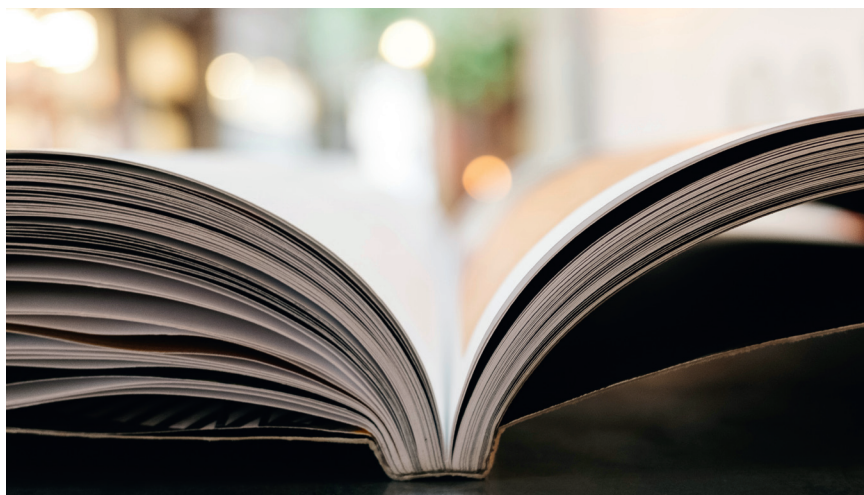


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**Identity Development**

**PREVENT  
RADICALISATION  
THROUGH  
IDENTITY  
DEVELOPMENT**



# HOME IS WHERE I AM - SUPPORT MIGRANTS TO MAKE THE MOST OF THEIR ADVENTURE

**A HANDBOOK FOR PRACTITIONERS TO PRESENT THE CONCEPT OF (PR)IDE**

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Sweden, [www.proifall.se](http://www.proifall.se)

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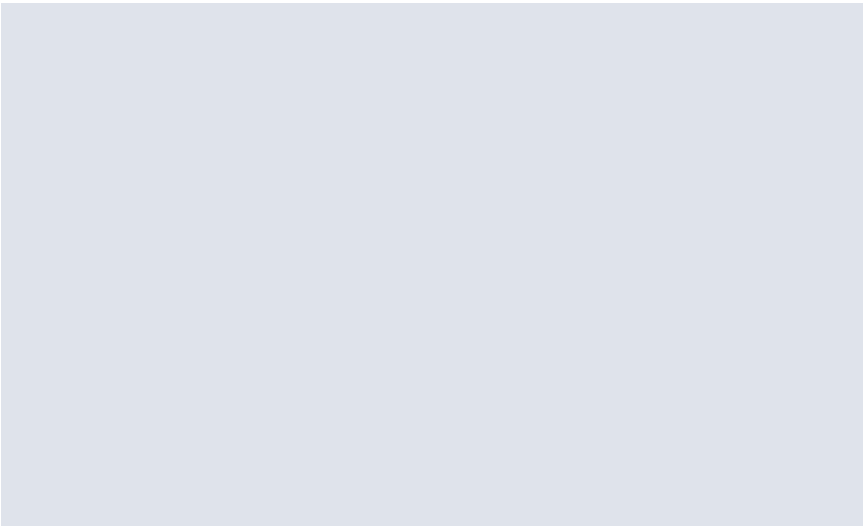


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## WHAT (PR)IDE IS ABOUT

(PR)IDE is a project for young people and youth workers in non-formal education as well as for teachers in formal education. It is about the building of resilience in times of change and the prevention of radicalisation. The approach focuses on learning about and developing identity. The term “learning” refers to all dimensions of learning, and in this case it aims at a transformation of perspectives, emotions and behaviour. The increased resilience will allow young people to navigate safely in times of change and to manage and control their destiny, even in times and environments of perceived discrimination and marginalisation. During our work, it turned out that taking emotions into account was the key to success.

If one looks at young people, who fell prey to violent radicalisation and/or extremism, one notices, that there is not one unique pathway to violence. It always comes down to a combination of the past and present situation of the individual and particular circumstances in his or her environment. In particular during adolescence and young adulthood, young people are particularly vulnerable, and men seem to be at higher risk than women. Part of it can be explained, amongst other factors, by the different developmental tasks, which every person undergoes while growing up and old.



Illustration 1: Sketches from the (PR)IDE-Learning experience in Berlin, 2018

## IDENTITY AND VIOLENT RADICALISATION

If we say that there is not one single event, circumstance or predisposition that fosters violent radicalisation, there is still one element that all violently radicalised people seem to share. They have a very strong feeling that their violent activities need to be done; that they need to be done by them and that it is justifiable to perform them at almost any cost to others or themselves. They feel intrinsically tied to an ideal or a faith, normally represented by a group that shares a metaphysical and/or ideological certainty. Although there is a plethora of circumstances that may lead the individual into the fangs of such groups, the radicalized person would insist that their radical and violent behaviour is the natural and unavoidable expression of their identity, which they perceive as essentially unchangeable. This is the main reason, why (PR)IDE focuses on the concept of identity and identity development in its approach to prevent violent radicalisation.

The RAN issue paper from April 2018 on “Protective and promotive factors building resilience against violent radicalisation” distinguishes between deficit and strengths-based approaches. Amongst the resilience-building assets are the perception of agency and significance, future orientation and identity, and it is this latter concept that (PR)IDE will focus on. (PR)IDE is certainly an empowering and strengths-based tool, which will have an impact on the perception of agency and henceforth help with the wise selection of choices for the future orientation of the individual.

Identity has been defined as one of three fundamental risk factors for violent radicalisation, together with the loss of social ties and perceived discrimination, by the authors of the study “Strengthening Resilience against Violent Radicalisation”. When identity becomes a risk factor, it is referred to as an identity crisis, which we will discuss in more detail later on.

The RAN project Identity, Belonging and Extremism identifies three modes of engagement, which are crucial to extremist narratives: a sense of identity, a sense of belonging and a sense of loyalty or duty. (RAN collection of approaches and practices, practice 5.5.9). The extremist narrative, combined with a familiar and superficially trustworthy group of people,

can be the answer in the quest for identity and a possible, albeit dangerous solution to end the identity crisis.

## THE NEED FOR IDENTITY

According to the German-American psychologist Erik H. Erikson, the building of an identity is a developmental task that will be taken on during adolescence. Identity defines the place of the individual in society - in a way it defines the space between the individual and society. It is closely related to self-esteem, perceived agency and a set of values and ideals.

The sense of identity can be perceived as the result of the previous developmental tasks, which begin with the development of one's own will and the competence to act purposefully. The new element that goes along with the development of identity is the societal component. Speaking with the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman, identity can also be seen as the result of a negotiating process between the individual and its environment.

According to the Swiss sociologist Etienne Wenger, identity has the following components:

- identity as negotiated experience
- identity as community membership
- identity as a learning trajectory: seeing time with change as an element of identity
- identity as the nexus of multi-membership
- identity as the relation between the local and the global

This list of fields, in which identity plays a role, shows just how strongly related the concept of identity is to the threat of violent radicalisation. Community membership answers the need to belong; the negotiating part influences self-esteem, whereas the awareness of the learning trajectory aspect is the new learning content supplied by (PR)IDE.

In short, identity can be seen as the intersection of how we are perceived by others and how we want to be perceived, and it is thereby closely connected to the level of self-esteem. It defines and is defined by our relationships to our environment. In a stable environment, where there are few changes and choices, the identity-development takes place mostly un-

awares. The individual belongs to the group that they are born into, and many of life's important choices are beyond their control. For the stability and well-being of an individual, this is a rather supportive and stable state - unless something unforeseen happens.

## IDENTITY CRISIS

Things become more challenging, when this stable situation is disrupted. There are different factors that may lead to this disruption.

One of them, which is the product of an individualistic, post-industrial society is what has been termed de-traditionalisation by the British anthropologist and sociologist Paul Heelas. The modern society seems to offer a plethora of options and choices, which are or seem to be within the reach of the individual, and which may be perceived as promises for the future. This makes the task of identity development much more challenging than it used to be in pre-modern societies. Paradoxically, the rejection of the modern freedom of choice, which is shared by many of the populist movements in Europe, is a very strong contributor to a polarised world-view.

The second threat to a stable identity development is fundamental change, and this is where (PR)IDE sets in. If the process of identity-building is disrupted by events beyond the control of the individual, there is a high risk of an identity crisis. If identity is the space between the individual and society, it becomes clear that this space needs to modify its form, if the environment is significantly different. The attempt to maintain the shape (i.e. identity) in its present form will necessarily lead to conflict and confusion. Because identity is not something that can be unilaterally constructed by the individual, or superimposed by society, the individual has the power to withstand the environmental change for some time, but this will require an increasingly large effort. Sooner or later, most individuals reshape their identity as a result of continued interaction with the new environment, thereby reducing the effort and at the same time reducing conflicts with the society around them. This process is also known as acculturation, and if it affects deeper layers of the individual: it affects the identity.

The third threat to the stable identity is the simple fact of growing up and entering adult life.

If we take all three potential threats to the stability of identity together, we can't but notice that young migrants are likely be affected by them all: in many cases, they come from societies with less individual freedom of voice, they undergo fundamentally changed environment, and finally they find themselves at an age where identity development and entering into adult life are of crucial importance. Together, these factors lead to a higher vulnerability, and with (PR)IDE we have tried to make the young migrant more resilient or less vulnerable to the lures of simplistic answers.

During long discussions with our young team-members, we became aware, that the idea of individuality when referring to the identity is in itself a culturally pre-determined concept. The expectation to act individually combined with individual freedom of voice and individual choices is a big challenge to self-esteem, self-concept and the overall perception of identity. It is very important to discuss the differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures with the young people.

Such a crisis on its own can be seen as a natural part of growing up as a young individual in a modern society, and as the starting point to make personal choices regarding the young person's preferred way of life. There is a multitude of offerings of support for young people, who find themselves in such a situation. Many of those offerings come from the natural environment, i.e. the local sports club, members of the family, the community, teachers et cetera. But not every young person finds fitting offerings in this environment. This is in particular true for migrants, and even more so for refugees, who have left all those trusted groups behind on their flight towards a better future. In such a situation, it is quite natural for the individual to trust and prefer offerings from groups that he can relate to by a common cultural or linguistic background.

All those offerings can be placed on a continuum with the poles "empowerment" (eventually leading to true freedom of choice) and "disablement" (eventually leading to closed group thinking). Individuals are free to look for help and support and to move along this continuum, for example starting with the support from a religious group, which rather leads to the disabling, closed group end of the spectrum. Once their emotional stability is sufficiently

resurrected, they may move on towards more empowering offerings. It is the distinctive feature of some religious groups (e.g. cults and sects) that they try to keep the individual from moving on towards the empowerment programmes, because they fear that the natural quest for freedom will remove the individual from their grasp. Once an individual has fallen prey to such a group, it will be very difficult to make them an alternative offering, that will overcome the strong sense of belonging that the individual has cultivated in this group. (PR)IDE is very firmly based at the empowering end of the continuum, and it aims at preventing the individual to succumb to such temptations.

If the perceived identity crisis goes along with an alluring narrative from a familiar and trusted background, i.e. a group of people offering the fulfilment to the need to belong consisting of a critical mass of people, that already belongs to the group, this group will have a good chance to recruit the searching individual as a new member and have a strong influence on the further, potentially dangerous development of his or her identity.

## IDENTITY AND STABILITY

Ideally, the process of identity development and potential changes to the identity, takes place unconsciously and without being actively controlled. This is why most people have neither a clear idea nor the desire to know more about their own identity. Identity only becomes an issue, when the individual feels incongruence between his presumed identity and the feedback he receives from the environment.

Although the identity is perceived to be a stable property of the individual, it is in reality the result of incessant negotiation with the environment. Most people, when looking at themselves, say “This is me” and they refer to it as a constant, stable phenomenon, which they perceive to be the sum of “self “. If they think about it, they perceive a changing identity as a threat. The good part is that people always perceive the present identity as being similar to what their identity has been like all along and they expect it to remain unchanged. It is this error in perception, that protects the individual from a feeling of uncertainty, and which helps the individual to have an answer to the question: “Who am I?”



There are situations, though, where this illusion can't be upheld. If we say that identity is a process of negotiation with the environment, we need to take into account, that none of us lives in just one uniform environment, and that our environment is hardly ever immune to change. Together with the variety of groups that we belong to, we also have differing negotiating results and, by consequence, different identities. Again, for most of us this is not a problem. We have a different identity as a father or mother, husband or wife, as a colleague, as a member of the sports team et cetera. If the environment changes, this does not necessarily mean that none of those identities can still continue to be appropriate. If, for example the migrant travels together with members of his family, he can uphold his identity as member of his family for some time, whereas the identity that has been negotiated with teachers or colleagues at work is likely to need to change. This is one of the reasons, why membership in a group of people, where a part of the identity can be upheld, will always be more attractive than membership in a group, where the negotiation process has to start anew, and where the resulting identity is uncertain, with all the risks to self-esteem that this brings along.

This is in particular the case, where the group is bound together by religion or faith. The identity of a Catholic, a Muslim or the member of any other religious group will always be quite clearly defined and convey a feeling of certainty. This is, amongst other courses, due to the high degree of ritualised behaviour. If, on the other hand, a Muslim migrant lives in an islamophobic environment, he will by force perceive this part of his identity as threatened.

## IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

So far, we identified identity as a key concept in the radicalisation process. We have also seen, that young migrants are particularly at risk to develop an identity crisis. This risk will increase with hostile attitudes in the hosting society (such as xenophobia and islamophobia). To adapt to the new environment, identity will be adapted accordingly. This mostly happens (or does not happen) without a conscious effort. In order to equip the migrant with the

power to steer this process, (PR)IDE has looked for ways to give the individual control. How can this be achieved?

The key to our empowerment strategy lies in the concept of Transformative Learning. Illeris (see the literature list) describes it as the acquisition of a new understanding of the dealings with the outside world. It refers to the individual being a person in contact with the world, and how they relate to and want to be perceived by others. Illeris refers to the concept of change and identity, as we described them above.

It is a concept that is usually applied in adult education and deals with resistance to change, in particular at the workplace. But we found that the concept can be more widely applied and also be used with people at younger age, in particular in later adolescence and early adulthood.

The concept goes back to the American sociologist Jack Mezirow, who noted, that learning is similar to a process of construction of meaning. Several learning results are grouped together by what he calls a meaning perspective. Understanding one's environment means, that we have developed or learned a meaning perspective that enables us to interact purposefully with our environment. If we learn, we can either add information to existing meaning perspectives, we can gain new meaning perspectives and we can even learn to transform existing meaning perspectives, if we notice that our previous perspective is no longer usable for purposeful interaction with the environment.

To give an example, the role of the woman in society is such a learned meaning perspective. In a conservative Muslim or Catholic environment, women are expected to behave in a certain, culturally accepted way. As a member of such a community, we will develop expectations towards such behaviour, and as long as we interact with other members of this community, we will be able to act purposefully and induce the reactions that we expect. If the individual now moves to an environment, where equal rights and opportunities are an essential right for women, the learned meaning perspective will no longer lead to the intended results. The meaning perspective needs to be transformed by a learning process in order to

allow the individual to continue to communicate purposefully with members of their new environment.

It is quite obvious, that this transformation can meet with resistance, if it contradicts pre-existing values that are being perceived as essential to the individual's identity. The closer the transformation is linked to basal values and identity, the higher the resistance to change is likely to be.

(PR)IDE is a tool to allow the individual to become aware of this challenge and to make informed choices about a possible transformation of identity. (PR)IDE does not replace one identity by another, but it empowers the individual to select their best way forward and respects their decision.

## THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION

Identity transformation and transformational learning are difficult, exhausting activities that one tries to avoid, if possible. It needs a strong degree of motivation to start it, and we found that the associated emotion is the main force to get us going. The starting point is almost always a clash between the individual and its environment. In transformative learning terms, this is called a disorienting dilemma. If one follows the guidebook, the subsequent steps are

2. Undergo self-examination
3. Conduct a critical assessment of existing meaning perspectives
4. Relate to other people's experiences
5. Explore alternatives
6. Build self-confidence in your role

All these steps are very helpful in the process of integration and coping with a new environment. There is nothing new in this description and enumeration of activities, but quite often we notice that the individual chooses an alternative path after the first step, the experience of a disorienting dilemma. Why should that be?

The answer to this question comes from the innovative combination of what transformative learning calls the 'disorienting dilemma', and what in intercultural communication is called 'critical incident'. We learned that in both theories the individual is at risk to follow a destructive path: the rejection of the environment or hosting society, in order to maintain what may similarly be called the meaning perspective or the identity.

## TRANSFORMATION AND INTERCULTURALITY

### IT'S ALL ABOUT EMOTION

Taking that into account, the answer lies in the emotional impact of the dilemma or incident. To put it simply, critical incidents hurt and will be associated with feelings of shame and guilt. If the young person does not become aware of these feelings, he is unlikely to move on to the next step. He will instead be caught in a net of reproaches and denial.

If, for example, we avoid eye contact with the person that we are communicating with, we may do so because we have learned that this is a sign of respect. Our meaning perspective would lead us to expect, that our vis-à-vis will appreciate the sign of respect and treat us accordingly. In a different cultural environment, avoiding eye contact may be perceived as a sign of disrespect or a shifty personality. It may then happen that the reaction from our partner is totally different to what we expected, and it can be so in a way that deeply confuses us. As a result, we may be ashamed, we may feel guilty, and we may become angry or sad. If we don't become aware of the connection between the critical incident and the resulting emotion, we will not be able to follow the subsequent steps 2 - 6, because we have not allowed ourselves to notice the critical incident as such. This is due to the fact that we will be completely busy living up our emotions. On an even more basic level, before noticing or thinking about the causes for our emotions, we need to become aware of them. This is the very first step that we need to teach young people in order to empower them to deal with critical incident.

This process is even more difficult, if the young person is not used to reflect on their emotion, or, yet more difficult, if speaking or thinking about one's emotions is contradictory to the learned identity, which is a particular challenge for men in patriarchal societies.

So what can be done?

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

This intellectual output is a set of media that will allow any youth organisation to adopt (PR)IDE to support the target group of young migrants and prevent radicalisation.

It consists of:

HANDBOOK



a) handbook for practitioners to present the concept of (PR)IDE

WEBINAR



b) an online course

BEST PRACTICE



c) a collection of best practice examples from other youth organisations

FACBOOK



d) a Facebook group for all participants of the online course

YOUTUBE



e) a set of YouTube videos to be distributed

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