

# How to become a right-wing extremist

## *The contribution of political socialization research to explain right-wing extremist dispositions, attitudes and behaviour*

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Usually, right-wing extremist activities follow right-wing extremist attitudes. But right-wing extremist attitudes do not grow out of a vacuum. People are not born with political dispositions.

How do then grow up right-wing extremist attitudes in the course of one's personal development?

Political socialization research tries to answer this question from an individual perspective. It starts from the assumption that the family as the first and possibly most important stage of socialization also presents a relevant stage of political socialization.

Following the *transmission thesis* (Hopf/Hopf 1997: 134f), *direct* or *manifest* political socialization can take place in families: parents transmit their political convictions to their children, the elder brother introduces the younger into the right-wing extremist scene (Wagner 1998). But most of the right-wing extremist young people do not necessarily have right-wing extremist parents or brothers. But: above all, political socialization in families is *indirect* or *latent*. Internal processes in families which do not seem to have anything to do with political attitudes can be responsible for the development of political dispositions of young people, too.

Right-wing extremist attitudes include tendencies to authoritarianism, ethnocentrism and prosperity-chauvinism. Already at the beginning of the 1950s when oblivion and inhibition of National Socialism boomed in Germany, Adorno et al (1969; 1973) in their studies on the Authoritarian Personality stated that obviously (and theoretically logical) in authoritarian structured families, authoritarian structured children grow up. Critical theory lead the stated ethnocentrism of the test persons back on the idealization of the own parents, especially the father.

Negative childhood experience cannot be accepted and worked up because the Authoritarian Personality consciously does not see any reason for critique on the own parents. The idealization of the own parents can be seen as an expression for the process of inhibition. At the same time, it is the equivalent to an idealization of the own group which always includes the contempt of the foreign group.

But lots of people with right-wing extremist attitudes do not have dispositions to idealize their own parents. On the contrary, Hopf and Hopf (1997) describe the case of a young man, called "Xaver", who can hardly control his aggressions towards his father during the interview. Following Hopf and Hopf, the central concept of the parent's idealization must be relativized and classified in a more complex typology.

Possibly not only the experiences one make during childhood in the relationship with the reference-person are crucial but the way one handle it in the course of one's personal development. Hopf und Hopf refer to the thesis of attachment-research which says that family-internal relationship experiences and its working-up and representation in the age of adolescence are relevant for the development of political orientations and behaviour. Attachment-research analyses how the child's attachment to its reference-person is represented in the age of adolescence. Uncertain attachment experiences can cause different psychic "internal working models". Conflicts exist in every parent-child-relationship. But children with uncertain attachment experiences manage worse to overcome and work-up conflicts. "Xaver", the preoccupied-entangled and furious young man, has one in common with the right-wing extremist who idealizes his father (in the studies of the Authoritarian Personality): the aggression, aggression which has its origin in non-overcome



childhood conflicts and which should be directed towards the own parents. But the father as the representative of the more powerful is hard to attack. Another valve for the repressed aggression must be found. As a consequence, the aggression of the authoritarian structured who usually has little self-confidence is directed towards the weaker (because he is intent on never be the overcome himself). Existing right-wing extremist structures, scenes and cliques offer ways to transform the repressed aggression in aggressive activity against foreigners. The preoccupied hydrophobia of "Xaver" is an non-overcome part of the father-son-relationship which reproduces itself. In the case of "Xaver", it is the reason for his violent behaviour towards foreigners by the right-wing extremist clique which "Xaver" belongs to. Scapegoat-offers by public discourses (Funke 1995) give acknowledgement of legitimacy to the violence against foreigners (in contrary, aggression towards the own father socially is not seen as legitimate at all). Aggression can be projected. Feminist theories (Rommelspacher 1995) explain in similar ways the gender-specific reasons for right-wing extremist attitudes of women: aggression towards men (the more powerful) of the own groups can be transformed into aggression towards the foreign group/ a minority (which is weaker). Repressed wishes and longings can be projected in the same way as repressed aggression: One envy the foreigner what one wishes unaware for oneself and reproaches him with it. Envy and reproach lay close to another.

The level of individual psyche is only one possible level of analysis of right-wing extremist attitudes and behaviour. It must be combined with the analysis of other internal and external, short- and long-dated, historical, socio-economical and political factors (Stöss 1999). But ideas from political socialization research can explain why maybe people who have the same historical and socio-economical background have different political attitudes. Moreover, it must be considered, that right-wing extremism of 12 or 13 year old children can hardly be explained exclusively with socio-economic factors.

Also today, empirical studies show that right-wing extremist orientations of young people grow up in an authoritarian life environment (Hopf/Hopf 1997). Children and young people do not only live in their families. Wetzel et al (2000) proof the influence of the support by people at the same age with similar attitudes (peer group) for right-wing extremist violence. Also life environment in the quarter or village, in schools and youth clubs, in the church or in sports clubs can be formed in an authoritarian and hierarchical or in an democratic and discursive way. Aggression nourishes itself by a feeling of powerlessness, a "I am not asked"-, "I cannot influence things"-, "they do what they want anyhow"- and "discussion do not lead to anything"- feeling.

What we need is the democratization of all-day-structures and the active inclusion and participation of children and young people in their personal life environment.

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