By addressing life trajectories and political violence, human rights education can overcome radicalizing narratives

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As the needs and interests of young people are shifting under the influence of demographics and other social developments, 'new stories' have started to attract many that undermine the human rights narrative and nurture radical attitudes. This has consequences for human rights education (HRE). As competing narratives have gained a foothold in major target audiences of HRE, the latter has to realize it is facing an uphill battle. The evidence suggests that HRE can no longer rely on the mere transfer of knowledge and that the 'story of human rights' needs to be told in completely new ways. If HRE aims to change attitudes to be more inclusive and respectful, and to promote a struggle for justice, it has to make its story heard and win people over. Here HRE faces a central dilemma: how to promote fundamental freedoms while including the freedom not to subscribe to these same values? Instead of conceptual persuasion, emphasis should be put more on the affect, and relate to people's lived experiences. Crucially, HRE has to be prepared to make room for the discussion of the paradoxes of political violence. By making clear that it has vital relevance for its audience and can better answer the question of what someone should meaningfully do in life, HRE can change the narrative.

Keywords: human rights education; youth radicalization; narratives; relational learning; conflict

Introduction

In this article I focus on human rights education (HRE) and its complex relationship with current, accelerating youth radicalization as witnessed in most countries of Western Europe. In the words of Sharon Sliwinski, generally speaking the aim of HRE is: '… to instill a sense of dignity and ethical responsibility by teaching students about universally accepted principles and standards of conduct' (Sliwinski, 2005: 219). This 'process of instilling' is, however, taking place at the heart of a battle of ideas, where radicalizing narratives are becoming steadily more influential with young people. Although it is notoriously hard to define radicalization (Christmann, 2012), for our purposes, it suffices to reiterate the definition proposed by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, according to which radicalization is:

> the process through which an individual changes from passiveness or activism to become more revolutionary, militant or extremist, especially where there is intent towards, or support for, violence.
> (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2010: 2)

Let me start by referring to a piece of fiction that has captured the imagination of many. Three decades ago, the film version of the children's fantasy *The Neverending Story* by German author Michael Ende (1984) told a worldwide audience a tale that holds a key to our discussion of HRE: it vividly illustrates how stories matter for the transmission of values (Min *et al.*, 2012; Nelson *et al.*, 2012).

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The film tells us about an unhappy boy who is bullied by older youths and is seeking sanctuary in a bookstore. The shop owner shows him a magic book, which the boy cannot resist stealing. In it, he discovers the adventures of a hero who is everything he himself believes he is not: brave, strong, a winner. While reading the book in the secrecy of the school attic, and captivated by the adventures of the book's characters, the boy gradually begins to understand that he is actually part of the story and that the fantastical world he has been reading about can only survive by his intervention. Ultimately, at the very moment the ideal world threatens to collapse under the attacks of corruption and to disappear into oblivion, the boy saves that world. The story's plot features the key ingredients of the magic of transformation through ideological mobilization. It presents a young, isolated person, looking for sanctuary, eager for adventure, and with a longing to become a hero. These are the things myths are made of and they have an intrinsically spiritual dimension.

Big stories and competition

In fact, what we encounter here is an example of a 'big story', an overarching narrative that suddenly endows life with a new quality, with a higher meaning. It transforms one and leads one to act in a new identity. Although grand narratives were expected to wither away in our societies (Lyotard, 1984), what we witnessed, in fact, was a resurgence, reappearance, or revitalization of inspiring narratives, myths, religions, and ideologies. The phenomenon of new religious movements (Clarke, 2006), for example, coincides with the latter decades of the twentieth century. It is just one expression of the hunger that youth especially has for a world view that transcends life's banalities (Ebstyne King, 2003) and promises a leading role for their lives. It is the background against which current religious radicalization – at least in the Western hemisphere – has emerged (Kepel, 1994; Berger, 1999).

As HRE aims to change people´s attitudes to be more inclusive and respectful and encourage them to search for justice, persons in their early life stages, especially those in their formative years and more often than not in school, represent a critical target group for HRE. They find themselves in a phase where they have to make choices about who they want to be, for themselves and for others. In the industrialized countries, the ideas of social utopias that were prominent among youth in the 1960s to the 1980s have given way to more private conceptions of the social world (Leccardi *et al.,* 2012). Nowadays, the young – belonging to the generation of 'digital natives' – will autonomously peruse a variety of information and social media sources to educate themselves. In this regard, peers and social media have reinforced their influence at the expense of the influence of parents and schools (Min *et al.*, 2012). HRE has become part of a complex social (media) landscape that not only forces it to clarify and deepen the human rights message but, more importantly, that challenges it with competing, inspiring narratives.

We have to acknowledge that one of HRE's most fervent competitors in the market of ideas today is an Islamism that is becoming increasingly radicalized (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010). With roots going back at least a hundred years, this religious social movement (Moghadam, 2013) gained pace in the 1970s in the geographically contained context of the Middle East. Over several decades, however, the movement has morphed into a global one that, in many guises, has been in the headlines ever since (Roy, 2004). Labelled fundamentalist, extremist, (neo)jihadist, or Salafist (Meijer, 2013), the movement has even become part of the imaginary of industrialized societies that for decades were on a course of dissociating religion from public functions and institutions.

Human rights and human wrongs

In the twentieth century, international political discourse in much of governance, trade, and development tended more and more to steer clear of religious connotations and reasoning.

This has led to the current feeling of awkwardness in the face of resurging, expressly religious political discourse in these domains (Thomas, 2005). The language of human rights, in contrast, has flourished in the international context, steadily climbing the ladder of the international political agenda. In fact, so successful has this language been (Baehr and Castermans-Holleman, 2004) that critical voices have started questioning the integrity of human rights policies in the international sphere and have given leeway to theories that relativize the universal claim of these rights (Douzinas, 2007).

Currently, HRE is mainly concerned with more abstract concepts that are being endorsed by an international legal framework. It describes the 'ought' of these principles rather than the 'is' of specific, historical situations and contexts. But, presenting human rights from such a predominantly legal(istic) perspective drastically curtails their potential to reach people, especially those in formative life stages (Hung, 2014). HRE has to reach key audiences in a context that, increasingly, questions its principles. Mostly, promotion of human rights is not rejected because of their inherent value – as guiding criteria for how life among people should be lived – but for their complex relationship to the political environment in which they are being promulgated (Banchoff and Wuthnow, 2011).

In certain quarters, promoting human rights has come to be interpreted as instrumentalizing human rights in order for states to dominate weaker societies and exploit them. It is in this sense that some have started accusing human rights of being 'human wrongs' (Shemtob, 2009). In radical narratives, the promotion of human rights, humanitarian interventions, and peacebuilding missions are framed as poorly disguised violent acts, foreign aid efforts as hypocritical and self-serving. The characterization implies a notion of abuse by the state and presents opposition as a heroic feat. The frame of 'savages, victims, and saviours' (SVS) is a strong one. It is part and parcel of Islamist rhetoric but it is also the frame that human rights advocates use (Mutua, 2001). Both world views thus compete on this same, fundamental platform.

It is here that we touch on a central dilemma that HRE faces. Factually, HRE advances an (often implicit) grand narrative, aiming to persuade and mobilize its audiences. At the same time, it promotes fundamental freedoms *including* the freedom not to subscribe to its human rights values. HRE has to avoid imposing an ideology and, therefore, finds itself in a somewhat equivocal position compared to competing radical narratives.

Social justice and foreign policy

For many young people, social justice is a rallying cry. Issues of war and violence that government officials habitually dub 'foreign policy issues' are central to their world view (the bone of contention *par excellence* being US foreign policy). Obviously, HRE has a stake in discussing questions of international justice. But, whereas human rights advocates used to take for granted that (young) people would rally behind a call for justice in the name of humanity, many in their audiences now view such a call with suspicion. What is more, their competitors are using the same underlying frame *without* the disadvantage of being associated with ambiguous foreign policy agendas. They can dissociate themselves from policies that they portray as being hypocritical, imperialist, and aggressive.

The Islamist version of the frame stresses an additional aspect that – in the eyes of its followers – delegitimizes human rights discourse. It opposes man-made laws to an allegedly divine revelation of guiding principles (*sharia*). Human rights are thus contrasted with divine right. This further undermines the conventional human rights frame. When people accept the radical distinction, or even opposition, between human and divine, privileging divine origin, it becomes much harder to argue the case for universal human rights, as they can be characterized as the products of a culturally specific era and area. Moreover, radical religious perspectives

sometimes stress a personal obligation to actively fight a human rights approach (thereby opposing democratic elections, women's rights, LGBT rights, etc.) because corresponding acts or behaviour are deemed to be sinful or un-Islamic (Carle, 2005).

Since radical strategies have begun to weaken the appeal and impact of human rights discourse – reinforcing its unresolved tensions and exploiting its underlying ambiguities – it no longer suffices to repeat the usual arguments. As studies of the communications strategies of extremist groups such as ISIS show, they are not just presenting, in most persuasive ways, their own agenda. An equally important element of their communications strategy is the active subversion of alternative and – in their eyes – inimical world views and interpretations of 'glocal' events (Ingram, 2015). They are promoting a 'counter-narrative' of sorts. While routinely described by opponents as 'superficial' or 'bankrupt', the jihadist narrative has proven to be very effective for recruiting young and often idealistic people. As radicalization specialist John Horgan pointed out in an interview:

> People who join these groups are trying to find a path, to answer a call to something, which would basically mean that they're doing something meaningful with their lives. That is a common denominator across the board. There's typically a very, very strong moral pull. You often see recruits are driven by this passionate need to right some perceived wrong, to address some sort of injustice, to restore honor to those from whom it's been taken.
>
> (Singal, 2014)

And Olivier Roy remarks on the topic of Al Qaeda:

> Al Qaeda gives a meaning to the flow of information that comes from the media, describing a world of violence, explosions, blood and wars. Al Qaeda presents its action as some sort of a video game, where youngsters can easily identify themselves as actors. Al Qaeda also makes use of the dominant discourse on the clash of civilisation by inversing the values. It fits with the division of the world into two competing principles, good and evil. AQ plays on the mirror effect: we are what you say we are, that is your worst enemy, and the proof is not what we do, but what you say.
>
> (Roy, 2008: 21)

Word and action

Cynically, integrity of word and action is part of the competing, radical narratives in the market of ideas and a main key to their success. Especially because these narratives remain largely hypothetical and untested, extremists can peddle the most radical utopian and apocalyptic ideas to contrast with the ambiguities and mediocrities in the daily life of their target audiences (McCants, 2015). But even when lived out in the practicality of everyday life, for example in Daesh territory, with all its deprivations and frustrations, the radical story is still strong and credible enough to lure new, dedicated adepts (Fredholm, 2012).

To some, the competition between HRE and radicalizing narratives would seem a lost battle. In order to prove them wrong, HRE has to answer the question of how to offer an overarching story that inspires but that at the same time highlights how hard choices are made in practice. It has to avoid offering an exclusive, near propagandistic narrative, entangled with state reason. As Zembylas notes in his discussion of the relationship between human rights and patriotism:

> One of the goals of this approach, then, is to teach students to see their emotional commitments as not beyond question, but subjected to critical interrogation. This is clearly different from aiming to produce, in students, any particular emotions, which is a form of indoctrination. On the contrary, the goal of the approach suggested here is to instil in students a critical attitude of not taking emotional commitments for granted, but examining their links to certain ideologies

– an attitude that does not preclude the development of a 'healthy', constructive and reasonable feeling of love for one's country.

<div align="right">(Zembylas, 2014: 1154)</div>

Without doubt, it would also mean that attention has to be paid to how each and every country is being held accountable and what policy criticisms are being raised against it internationally. It demands being candid about the very things that embarrass, perplex, and escape us.

An impressive attempt at doing this is to be found in James Dawes's *That the World May Know: Bearing witness to atrocity*. It is an account that tells the powerful story of the successes and failures of the modern human rights movement. Based on first-hand accounts from fieldworkers around the world, it paints a moving picture of the realities of confronting inhumanity. In its introduction Dawes writes:

> How do words move us? How do the stories we tell one another release our deep emotions – our pity, fear, or wonder? How do mournful aesthetic artifacts acquire the power to monopolize our regard, to make us gape or grieve, to make us forget, briefly, that they are only shadow worlds, that we are not connected to them? I wanted to understand these questions because I wanted to know what capacity fictional worlds had for creating moral forces commensurate with their mesmeric aesthetic forces. How, for instance, might our capacity for sorrow or outrage in response to an injustice depicted in a novel translate into our relationship with the social and political world, if at all?

<div align="right">(Dawes, 2007: 6–7)</div>

Dawes's approach departs from the question of how an emotional, nuanced message based on real-life paradoxes can have an activating impact. His question is eminently relevant to our discussion, as such a message could prompt militants and radicalized supporters to question the nobility of their cause. His approach contrasts with the reductive message of these radical religious groups. As terrorism analyst J.M. Berger remarks:

> ISIS is very good at simplifying everything into a binary question, black and white. What ISIS is offering is simple answers to all your questions, the more you can encourage them to see the world as a complex place, the better.

<div align="right">(Dickinson, 2015)</div>

This is where HRE's biggest challenges lie: how to embed the HRE narrative in a larger societal narrative that reflects the real-life experiences of its audiences and that puts emphasis on the affect. If HRE wants to be relevant, it has to be clear about its objective, who it wants to win over and how to relate to what is relevant to them. As human rights are – in a fundamental way – tied up with spiritual concerns (one's life project in this world, relationships with other people, and responsibilities towards society), HRE should be able to connect to the unique trajectories of people in different life stages and appeal to their need to belong – to someone and somewhere.

Radicalization and education

The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) in Europe has regularly addressed radicalization in education. Recently, it published its manifesto with recommendations for fighting radicalization in schools (RAN/PREVENT, 2015). Although the text is a sound reflection of the ongoing discussion by specialists on the topic (Pels and De Ruyter, 2012) and underlines the importance of the ability to hold 'difficult conversations' with pupils, it does not address the need for an engaging alternative story (Leuprecht *et al.*, 2010). The RAN's manifesto also lacks an adequate appreciation of the strategies and tactics of the adversaries with which they are dealing. The RAN approach does not offer an analysis of the mechanisms of success of radicalization, of its mesmerizing tales.

It is, therefore, helpful that recent research in HRE by Rebecca Adami (2014a; 2014b) points to fundamental but neglected mechanisms that should be recognized to re-enable HRE to tap into its relevance for various audiences, and especially for young people. HRE has to rediscover its inspirational force by talking more about the 'who' than about the 'what' of human rights. As Adami puts it:

> Indeed, our ability to actually relate to each other, I have suggested, is not in trying to learn 'about' the collective other, nor is it by being totally responsible of the other in attentive listening where I learn 'from' the other, but that we learn in relations, through narratives – a learning that calls for who you are, in the midst of everything that one is supposed to defend or defy.
>
> (Adami, 2014b: 87)

Acknowledging the particular strengths of aggressive, radicalizing communication and the relative weaknesses in HRE should open up room for devising more effective HRE responses. It involves taking into account real-life experiences and paradoxes of its target groups, engaging with people's sensibilities and concerns.

Life trajectories and conflict

Conflict and violence are an intrinsic part of many pupils' lives, either directly or indirectly, through experience or by way of the stories and images to which they are exposed (Quinn *et al.*, 2007). In much of HRE, however, the pedagogical process does not address the lived experiences of its audience (Hung, 2014). Generally, value-focused educational programmes in Europe address abstract European or national values. For example, in 2014, 'Guidance on promoting British values in schools' formulated its objective as follows:

> Examples of the understanding and knowledge pupils are expected to learn include: an understanding of how citizens can influence decision-making through the democratic process; an understanding that the freedom to hold other faiths and beliefs is protected in law; an acceptance that people having different faiths or beliefs to oneself (or having none) should be accepted and tolerated, and should not be the cause of prejudicial or discriminatory behaviour; an understanding of the importance of identifying and combatting discrimination.
>
> (HM Government, 2014)

It illustrates a point that Adami makes:

> Human Rights Education (HRE) has traditionally been articulated in terms of cultivating better citizens or world citizens. The main preoccupation in this strand of HRE has been that of bridging a gap between universal notions of a human rights subject and the actual locality and particular narratives in which students are enmeshed. This preoccupation has focused on 'learning about the other' in order to improve relations between plural 'others' and 'us' and reflects educational aims of national identity politics in citizenship education.
>
> (Adami, 2014a: 293)

European educational programmes do not regularly problematize the topic of political violence. There is a lack of discussion of the paradoxes of contemporary conflict and war (Davies, 2003). Reasons for this can be multiple, including the wish to avoid tensions between pupils from different ethnic or religious backgrounds. But young people in life stages that are all about the formation of a personality should be encouraged to question, experiment, and dialogue. A practical example of an initiative that incorporates such an approach is the Rights Respecting Schools Award. It is a UNICEF UK programme, started in 2006, that aims to put children's rights at the heart of schools in the UK and provides a framework for their direct participation on the basis of the Convention of the Rights of the Child:

> One of the relevant articles of the Convention that addresses the principle of participation is article 12, the right to be heard. Article 12 says that every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This principle recognises children and young people as actors in their own lives and applies at all times, throughout a child's life.
>
> <div align="right">(UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools Award)</div>

Neglecting to engage with the reality of pupils' lives is a handicap to the HRE project. A telling example of the possibly alienating and even escalating effect of HRE – but from a different region – is given by Johanna Ospina:

> In 2014, in the Gaza Strip, the government of Hamas blocked the introduction of textbooks promoting human rights, which are part of the Human Rights Education (HRE) programme implemented by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in its schools, arguing that these textbooks were against Islamic values and ignored the local and historical reality of Palestine. The rejection of the textbooks is the latest manifestation of the negative attitude of Hamas towards HRE. In their view the curriculum ignores the Palestinian suffering, the role of the resistance and does not acknowledge the right to resist through armed struggle. The principles of the curriculum – such as human dignity, non-discrimination, inclusion, and tolerance – are in stark contrast to what people in Gaza are experiencing under the Israeli occupation. As a result the limitations of the international human rights instruments for the actual protection of human rights are made disconcertingly clear.
>
> <div align="right">(Ospina, 2015: 1)</div>

Instances of political violence, as in wars and in suppression of insurgencies, past and current, can and should be treated openly and responsibly (Cowan and Maitles, 2012) in order to connect HRE to actual life trajectories. The alternative is that pupils are presented with a mix of 'descriptive' rhetoric, tacitly side-stepping the thorny paradoxes of war and conflict (Morris, 2015), and a 'prescriptive' set of values that do not reflect their own lived experiences (Roux, 2012; Adami, 2014b). Their use of critical reflection – a professed objective of the educational programmes (Waring and Evans 2014) – can consequently produce a 'cognitive dissonance', leading to scepticism and deep distrust and creating a 'cognitive opening' for competing narratives. It is often left to teachers and trainers to cope with that distrust that is steadily undermining the integrity of their position and authority (RAN/PREVENT, 2015: art. 11).

Considering the above, in order to overcome the appeal of radicalizing narratives, HRE needs to find new ways to bring its story across. It will have to speak to (young) people's own life experiences and address the realities of political conflict and violence. It will have to stimulate thinking about the world as a complex place and still offer an 'overarching story' that appeals to emotions, and mobilizes into action. But it cannot – even implicitly – impose an exclusive, ideological world view.

There have been efforts that incorporate these insights. Often, they include forms of dialogue and play, thus creating room for participation and expression. One example that directly speaks to the topic of radicalization is a recent Belgian theatre piece entitled *Jihad*. The comedy – intended mainly for school children and students – opened in December 2014 in Brussels and has since successfully been staged in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. The story relates the adventures of three friends who no longer feel at home in their country and leave for the Middle East to join the jihadists. Once arrived, they face situations much less heroic than they had anticipated:

> The play is funny and moving at the same time. Though it skirts with stereotypes and a few scenes suffer from a little wooden acting, for the most part it moves along a good clip, never boring

or overtly moralising – a gripping presentation of tortured souls caught between two worlds, rejected by both.

(The Economist, 2016)

After performances, the playwright of *Jihad*, Ismael Saïdi, regularly engages the public in a long discussion, thus reinforcing the impact of the play. The play's success is an indication of how important imagination and creativity are in engaging young people in discussions on the sensitive questions that relate to their lives and to the choices they face.

Conclusion

In this article I have discussed the changing environment in which the younger generations in Western Europe are growing up and how it is affecting the ways in which HRE can reach and inspire them. HRE mainly seems to be operating in a framework of incontestability, as it aligns with the values that underlie current European educational programmes. However, HRE has to realize that it is one of many competitors in the 'market of ideas', a confusing, everyday environment, where pupils are being influenced and tempted by alternative discourses that, in some cases, question the very principles of what HRE aims to achieve.

One of the current competing discourses is a virulent religious extremism that rejects the human rights narrative and actively undermines it. Jihadist narratives exploit the ambiguities and paradoxes of identity politics and political violence and aim to convincingly present human rights discourses as state hypocrisy, covering up vicious atrocities. This reductive analysis proposes radical utopias as the remedy for a world in turmoil and it has an increasing impact on young people.

The changing environment forces HRE to find new ways to make its 'story' heard successfully. It needs to convince people of its relevance as a mobilizing force for better living – a call for humane behaviour in all circumstances and for everyone. This can only be achieved if HRE succeeds in speaking to the fundamental longing people have for a meaningful life and in winning the hearts and minds of youngsters eager to imagine themselves as heroes saving a world from disaster. But, rather than simply mirror the 'savages, victims saviours' (SVS) metaphor, HRE has to get to grips with a crucial dilemma: how to promote basic freedoms while emphasizing the freedom to dissent from human rights ideals? How to avoid the trap of imposing an alternative ideology while fighting exclusive thinking and discriminatory loyalties?

It is imperative that young people are offered a narrative that is engaging and truthful, and that speaks to their situation and life project. By fostering genuine participation and sincere dialogue that includes a critical awareness of the use and limits of violence, HRE can contribute to a narrative that exposes radical violent movements as destructive and celebrates the defence of people's rights. When a society has no credible, alluring, and truly relevant narrative to offer, people might feel compelled to look elsewhere.

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