

Youth workers engage “radicalized” young Dutch Muslims

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Publication date

2015

Document Version

Other version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Abdallah, S. (2015). *Youth workers engage “radicalized” young Dutch Muslims*. Abstract from Journal of youth studies Conference 2015, Copenhagen, Denmark.

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Abstract for presentation held at Journal of youth studies Conference 2015: Contemporary youth contemporary risks, at the University of Copenhagen, March 30th – April 1st, 2015

Included in: Programme book of abstracts, p. 109

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Abstract:

“Radicalization” has in the Netherlands become a hot topic as young Muslim men in Europe make their way to Syria and Iraq to join armed struggles, ostensibly based on their religious convictions. In public debates “radicalization” has become an umbrella-term referring to Muslims militants, passive sympathizers, as well as possible future contributors to general dangers. Some researchers have adopted and reproduced this term as a social scientific concept, claiming to explain the “radicalization” phenomenon or “measuring” the success of “de-radicalization” initiatives. In some of these cases, researchers have hardly interacted with the “radicalized” young people. Their contributions end up obscuring more than they clarify. Conversely, my contribution will show that the behavior of “radicalized” young Muslims is not a unified phenomenon, but consists of complex and diverse paths of development, leading to varied possible outcomes. A preliminary scan shows “thrill seekers”, “naïve ideologists”, and “intelligent revolutionaries” as important categories, while some young people display characteristics of more than one of these categories. Furthermore, I will describe how some youth workers have developed sophisticated approaches to engage with these young people, yielding differing results, all of them quite unknown to the general public. Elements are “maintaining casual contact”, “standing beside them”, “exploring life opportunities”, and “challenging ideologies”. Certain political and media representatives influence public opinion toward a oneproblem-one-solution approach. Realities are more complex and diverse and youth workers seem to have at least the start of a more adequate response, evolved from long term contact and experience.