

LEARNING TO BE A GOOD MUSLIM – MO(MOVE)MENTS BEYOND GANG ENGAGEMENT AND RADICALIZATION

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RESEARCH FOCUS

- A **cross over field** between gang engagement and religious/ideological radicalization
- A focus on **religion as everyday life practice** (McGuire 2008)
- The meaning of engagement and **participation in religious communities** of practice (Khawaja 2010) across contexts (prison, forensic psychiatry and a mosque)
- The transformative force of religiosity and **boundary communities** (Mørck 2006)

In a political climate with an increase in societal polarization in relation to Muslim and ethnic minorities and stricter intervention practices targeting radicalization, crime and gangs



MAIN QUESTION

How is it possible to move beyond gang engagement and radicalization through engagement in religious communities of practice?



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- 3 years of interviews, conversations online and offline with X, a former gang leader who now is in a forensic psychiatric ward
- Interviews and conversations with key people in X's life – his Sheikh, wife and the head nurse
- Participant observations and access to main contexts in X's life- eg. the Muslim learning center (mosque).



MO(VE)MENT METHODOLOGY

- The focus on mo(ve)ment and not just moment shifts the research interest from the **individual experience to processes of becoming and learning** (Davies & Ganon 2009, Mørck & Celosse-Andersen, 2019).
- We focus on **pivotal moments in X's life** which he remembers as specifically life changing.
- These are moments that work **as catalysts of transformation in X's movement** away from gang engagement and radicalization and his movement towards learning to become a better Muslim.
- Our mo(ve)ment research explore *expansive learning* (Mørck 2010) and *identity formation /subjectification* (Butler 2001, Khawaja 2010) with specific focus on the ***movements beyond marginalization, radicalization and racialized polarizations***



”THE PORK CHOP MOMENT”

’I sat in the high security prison (Politigården), **the worst place you can be placed**, you cannot get any worse. And then there was just this tiny cell, and then there was **this Quran which looked at me**, and I looked at it, and then I was caught by it from the first moment. And God talked to me through it” (...) In the high security prison, if we return to that, where I started to pray. **I got these extreme ideas with these desires, that I had to overcome and pass.** Then this idea came, that if you catch an infidel, then you have to do this and this, and then I started thinking: “I am a great person, now I will become a great person in the eyes of God, and then I will just go to Paradise”.

In that moment, **I just saw Paradise in front of my eyes.** All my love was just moved from all the bad things [criminal thoughts, and desires after money and material things] to God. It was what I wanted, I wanted to achieve something. **I still needed to feel that adrenalin** [...] I was constantly looking for signs. And then they [the prison guards] put **a pork chop on my plate**, and then I thought to myself: This was a sign, and that he [the prison guard] should die”





A MOMENT OF CONFLICTUAL STRUGGLE

- being isolated, marginalized and triggered by the guards
- being religiously engaged, seeking answers in the Quran, turning towards a radicalized version of Islam
- moving beyond this through religious engagement and desistance to radicalized ideas and his former life as a gang leader



AN "AHA MOMENT"

- X describes how **reading an Islamic book** which his father gave him changes his outlook and approach to Islam
- He moves away from violent and extremists thoughts and ideas about taking down the infidels – represented among others by the prison guards - to **a path of humility and spirituality.**
- He obtains a deep sense of meaning in trying to become a better Muslim by **changing his habits, his name and thereby leaving behind his previous life.**
- It is possible to understand this change and mo(ve)ment in X as a shift in his learning practice, his identity and telos (Iave 1997).



LEARNING THROUGH PARTICIPATION AND BELONGING IN A COMMUNITY

The Muslim learning center (the mosque)

- X visits the mosque regularly and follows their online classes as well
- He participates in the **daily prayers** and **dhikr-gatherings** where the present members engage in the remembrance of God or the praising of the Prophet Mohammad
- It is a “**second generation mosque**”, as it is run by young people, most probably descendants of immigrants.
- Here X has found a **religious guide, his Sheikh**, whom he greatly admires.



“MY SHEIKH, HE ONCE TOLD ME - IT REALLY MADE SENSE”

'My Sheikh, he once told me - it really made sense - "**Have you studied crime?**" he said. Meaning did you study crime before you became criminal? Then I thought, "No, you do not." [...] It is the same with Islam. **You just start coming among good people, and then you begin to behave like them.** Or you start to come among researchers, and then you start to speak research language, right? Or people who do journalism work, you start to become like them. Then the interest comes afterwards (in regard to) what you study. "Have you read some books in crime?" [the Sheikh asked]. Then there were some, who raised their hands. I did not raise my hand because I could not remember that I had read something (...) Then one of them says that, when they are going to do a robbery or something, they start to think: "What time does the train come? What time does the car come?" **That is studying! So you actually study in that environment too.** Then I thought about it, that I also obtained the knowledge that way. (...) It was also an education, I gave people. It was constant organization (...)."



SOHBAT- THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

- A moment of realization and learning highlighting **religious practice as practices of learning**
- Also highlighting the importance of **belonging and the company you engage with** (sohbat)
- Sohbat and the experience of belonging (Khawaja 2010) can be seen as **active strategies of desistance** from X's former life.
- X prioritizes being in communities and with people, who are better than himself, who he can look up to and who can guide him in the direction, he wants to move towards
- The **mosque** is in this regard a very important boundary community, where he in the company of others from many different walks of life and backgrounds, **can practice how to become a better Muslim.**





FINDINGS

- We propose a **framework of understanding religious engagement in a Muslim community** as participation in a boundary community, which opens up possibilities of partly **transgressing positions of marginalization** (Mørck 2006).
- This perspective offers a **novel way of understanding religious practice as connected to trajectories of learning, belonging and subjectification** in and across contexts, communities.
- Participation in the **mosque, can in itself be a way of transcending and moving beyond a criminalized and marginalized position,**
- The religious **community fosters a sense of belonging** which works as a **buffer** against experiences of marginalization, racialization and suspicion.
- In a larger context, **Islam and Muslimness, is highly stigmatized and racialized,** which is why X's movements of learning in the mosque still can be seen as being on the margin of the larger society.



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