



Utrecht University

COMPLEMENTARY APPROACHES IN YOUTH WORK TO COUNTER POLARIZATION

*Views of youth professionals towards a combined framework of intergroup contact and
Positive Youth Development*

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Abstract

This thesis aims to constitute a framework for youth work activities to counter problematic polarization among young people more effectively. For this, several professionals in the fields of youth work and/or polarization were interviewed. Firstly, two dimensions of polarization are distinguished; ‘vertical’ frustrations towards society and institutions, and ‘horizontal’ segregation and distrust towards other groups. The different causes leading to these dimensions could be mitigated in various ways. The pedagogical Positive Youth Development approach could address personal frustrations by fostering self-efficacy, and the social-psychological intergroup contact theory ought to improve relations between different groups by letting them have positive interactions. This thesis integrates the most important aspects of both these approaches into a combined framework which could tackle both dimensions of polarization simultaneously. After all, respondents argued that these dimensions are interrelated and should both be addressed, because vertical discontent might manifest itself towards other groups. Activities within this framework consist of heterogenous groups working together to develop their competencies and talents.

Keywords: polarization, youth work, positive youth development, intergroup contact

Het doel van deze thesis is het ontwikkelen van een kader voor jeugdwerk activiteiten om problematische polarisatie bij jongeren te voorkomen. Hiervoor zijn verschillende professionals geïnterviewd in het veld van jongerenwerk en/of polarisatie. Eerst wordt een onderscheid gemaakt tussen twee dimensies van polarisatie; ‘verticale’ frustraties jegens de maatschappij en diens instituties, en ‘horizontale’ segregatie en wantrouwen richting andere groepen. De verschillende aanleidingen voor deze dimensies kunnen op meerdere manieren aangepakt worden. De pedagogische Positive Youth Development approach kan persoonlijke ontevredenheid verhelpen door zelfredzaamheid te bevorderen, en de sociaalpsychologische intergroep contact theorie wordt dikwijls gebruikt bij het verbeteren van relaties tussen verschillende groepen door positieve interacties te faciliteren. Deze thesis combineert de belangrijkste aspecten van deze benaderingen tot een kader dat beide dimensies van polarisatie tegelijk aanpakt. Volgens de respondenten zijn deze dimensies namelijk verweven en moeten ze beiden geadresseerd worden, aangezien verticale onvrede zich horizontaal kan manifesteren op andere groepen. Activiteiten binnen zo’n gecombineerd kader zouden bestaan uit gemixte groepen die samen hun competenties en talenten ontwikkelen.

Steekwoorden: polarisatie, jongerenwerk, positieve jeugdontwikkeling, intergroep contact.

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1. Introduction

Polarization is a growing issue in today's European society and has increasingly become a topic of discussion (V-dem, 2019). A certain degree of polarization in public debate is not necessarily problematic, but there is a risk of escalating into 'us-versus-them' thinking, distrust and exclusion. This may affect the social cohesion of a society and develop a breeding ground for radicalization and extremism (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017; McNeill-Willson, 2019).

This process also takes place among youngsters, who are even more vulnerable for polarizing ideas (RAN, 2017). Moreover, teachers and other youth professionals in The Netherlands have declared to increasingly struggle with extreme opinions and attitudes of their pupils (Azough, 2017; Wansink & de Graaf, 2019). As there are multiple causes and aspects of polarization, there are also various initiatives and frameworks attempting to mitigate polarization, either with similar or different approaches. Interventions are for example focused on intergroup contact, dialogue, or on providing youngsters with certain competencies and so avoid marginalization (van Wonderen, 2020).

This research aims to combine the pedagogical Positive Youth Development approach (Benson, 2003; Damon & Gregory, 2004; Damon, 2004; Youth.gov, 2021) with the social psychological intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). I aim to integrate the most important aspects of these two approaches towards a combined framework, through which youth work interventions could address various root causes for polarization at once.

1.1 Polarization

For this research, I conceptualized polarization according to the definition of the Youth prevention Extremism and Polarization platform, or JEP in Dutch:

Polarization is the hardening of differences between groups in society which can result in mutual tensions and increasing segregation. Polarization and tensions are always present in society and are not necessarily problematic. If polarization gets so bad that it leads to threatening situations, it is problematic. Some people or groups actively polarize in order to increase support for violence and extremism. (JEP, 2019)

As an addition to this definition, van Wonderen et al. (2020) stated that polarization can happen along various lines; political, religious or cultural for example, but also between urban and rural,

poor and rich or around important events like the COVID-19 pandemic (Wansink, 2020). Also according to literature, the current polarization in society has grown in a context of financial crisis, austerity policies, and frustration with declined living standards. This discontent created a foundation for ‘us-versus-them’ thinking, which has also been utilized by certain political parties and movements in order to gain support. Polarizing narratives like this could for example be aimed at immigrants, the elite, the poor, or other ‘scapegoats’ (RAN, 2017; McNeill-Willson et al., 2019).

According to Brandsma (2020), polarization is mostly a thought construct. People think in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’, which might be reinforced through discussions and judgements about identity. Within group contexts, opinions and attitudes about other groups then might become increasingly extreme and adverse. This is what Borum (2011) calls ‘group polarization’, which can even be accelerated through social media (NJI, 2019). Brandsma (2020) also argues that besides thoughts, polarization is also largely a matter of feelings and emotions. Such feelings are for example anger, fear of the unknown, or discontent. Therefore, facts and arguments can barely tackle polarization if feelings, emotions and their causes are not being addressed. Furthermore, Brandsma pleads for strengthening the middle ground in order to tackle polarization, rather than addressing extreme voices. Thus, emphasizing normalcy and ‘the grey middle’ is considered to be more effective than addressing polarizing differences or narratives.

Polarization does not necessarily lead to radicalization, but it can contribute to its breeding ground. If differences between people evolve into adversity, polarization affects the cohesion in society and can lead to social exclusion. Therefore, the prevention of radicalization and countering problematic polarization are intertwined (RAN, 2017). In order to avoid such negative consequences of polarization, we have to know where it comes from and which factors are at play in its development.

The underlying causes for polarization formulated above could be either distinguished as personal insecurity, fear and discontent, or as distance from other groups in society and group processes. These different causes then require different approaches to mitigate them, which will be discussed later on.

1.1.1 Polarization among youngsters

Adolescence is a period when youngsters are very vulnerable to polarization. They are looking for identity and belonging, and others in the social environment play an influencing role in this (RAN, 2017; JEP, 2019). Groups of youngsters with different backgrounds (along various lines)

were reported to interact less often, and to have contacts rather limited to their own environment, which makes spontaneous intergroup dialogue difficult (van Wonderen et al., 2020). According to Borum's (2011) concept of group polarization, such in-group dynamics can manifest themselves through negative attitudes towards other groups. This tendency is not directly creating triggers for escalation, but might lead to segregation and distrust. Tensions generally only become visible when a 'trigger' happens like an event in the media or in one's personal life. This reported segregation might exist between schools or neighborhoods, as well as on social media (van Wonderen et al., 2019). Interventions to mitigate this distance could be aimed at fostering positive contact between groups, in order to break through negative perceptions of each other (van Wonderen et al., 2020).

Van Wonderen et al. (2019) also note that youngsters with polarizing opinions from different backgrounds often have similar concerns; they feel like victims of society and are angry about not finding their place in it. These frustrations are then more often aimed 'vertically' towards society and institutions, rather than 'horizontally' towards other groups. Following this perspective, preventing and tackling polarization starts with actively engaging youngsters in society and increasing their resilience towards polarizing factors such as feelings of deprivation or exclusion. Interventions could tackle these issues by embracing youngsters and reaching them opportunities to acquire certain (social) competencies.

Again, causes of polarization are identified in two distinct ways; either through victimhood or through distance. The distinction between **vertical and horizontal** makes these processes easily understandable, and will therefore be a pillar for the rest of the thesis. These will be referred to as vertical/horizontal dimensions or vertical/horizontal polarization, according to the appropriate context.

1.1.2 Role of youth work

Schools provide a major opportunity to function as a lab for democracy and foster resilience among youngsters. They try to create a safe environment where youngsters can experience social and democratic values, deal with different opinions, and become resilient towards extremism and problematic polarizing behavior (RAN, 2017). What has been reported by van Wonderen (2019) in The Netherlands however, has been a certain degree of segregation between schools, neighborhoods and different backgrounds.

This issue of segregation offers a need and an opportunity for youth workers. They frequently have direct contact with various youngsters in the streets, at youth centers or online. They know

what youngsters struggle with, and can also play a role in facilitating meaningful discussions between different groups on controversial topics (RAN, 2017).

Youth work has also been valued as an important field where youngsters can acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes for civic engagement and social action, and realize their full potential as autonomous members of society (CoE, 2015). For a concrete working definition of youth work, this thesis refers to the Council of Europe Youth Work Portfolio (2015):

Youth work is commonly understood as a support for the personal development, social integration and active citizenship of young people. Youth work is an umbrella term for all kinds of activities with, for and by young people of a social, cultural, educational or political nature. It belongs to the domain of ‘out-of-school’ education, most commonly referred to as either nonformal or informal learning. The main objective of youth work is to create opportunities for young people to shape their own futures. (CoE, 2015)

Azough (2017) pleads for more investment in Dutch youth work in order to mitigate processes of polarization and radicalization. After all, youth workers are able to prevent feelings of exclusion among youngsters because they can offer opportunities for capacity building and strengthen social cohesion (Elich, 2017).

1.2 Countering polarization

Youth work provides various opportunities to foster social goals like preventing problematic polarization. Such interventions could be based on different frameworks and approaches. After all, polarization has various causes, as we have seen in the distinction between the vertical and horizontal dimension.

1.2.1 Intergroup contact (IGC)

From literature became clear that a major approach in overcoming problematic polarization is based on the so-called *intergroup contact theory* in order to mitigate issues of segregation and distrust between different groups in society.

The intergroup contact hypothesis was introduced by Allport (1954), and was based on the idea that structural contact between different groups could reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations. The bottom line of this theory is that if an individual has positive and empathic relations with one or more individuals of the ‘other’ group, attitudes towards the whole outgroup improve (Pettigrew, 1998; Al Ramiah, 2013). However, superficial exposure to the outgroup does not suffice for better intergroup attitudes and can even be counterproductive.

Therefore, Allport also specified four conditions to take into account regarding contact: equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support from social and institutional authorities (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011; Vezzali & Stathi, 2020).

Van Wonderen (2019) developed a factsheet of do's and don'ts for youth workers when facilitating intergroup contact between polarized groups (see appendix). Besides collaboration between equal groups towards a common goal, he also stressed the importance of investing in contact before there are actual problems, as well as the need to reach those who are not immediately interested, but might need it the most. Things to avoid would be giving attention to the extremes, choosing sides, asking money to participate, or emphasizing differences between groups. This caution with emphasizing differences relates to the social identity theory, which argues that merely categorizing people into social groups might lead them to prefer members of their own group over others (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). However, only focusing on the interpersonal level to foster positive attitudes undermines the opportunity to generalize positive attitudes regarding the other individual towards the whole 'other' group. In interventions, a degree of 'group salience', a balance between intergroup and interpersonal perceptions of 'the other', is thus needed in order to reap optimal benefits of this contact (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Al Ramiah, 2013).

The stipulations above summarize the most important takeaways from literature, and are thus essential to take into account when designing intergroup activities. This theory has been applied successfully in various contexts so far, preventive as well as post-conflict (Hayward et al., 2017). One example of an intervention aimed at mitigating segregation and polarization has been the 'Intergroup Contact Toolkit for diverse schools'. Here, groups of children were composed heterogeneously in order to foster positive attitudes by letting them engage in various activities together such as, play, expression, cooperative learning and projects with common goals (Quick, 2019).

The relevancy of the intergroup theory in this research is the goal to overcome horizontal polarization through collaborative activities where youngsters from different backgrounds can get to know each other.

1.2.2 Positive Youth Development (PYD)

The other framework addressed in this thesis is the *Positive Youth Development* approach. This strength-based prevention approach focuses on the competencies and potentialities of

youngsters, rather than focusing on their deficits (Damon, 2004). The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (Youth.gov) defines this approach as the following:

PYD is an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths. (Youth.gov, 2021)

This framework thus emphasizes the talents, and constructive interests that every young person possesses, and thereby aims to maximize young people's potential. Maximizing this potential is also a means of avoiding antisocial tendencies like polarization, which can arise when there is a lack of positive activities (Damon, 2004). The value of such approach, compared to interventions that only aim to prevent problems is also put forward by Benson: "Preventing a problem from occurring does not guarantee that youth are being provided with the assets they need for developing in a positive manner" (Benson, 2003, p.6).

Besides the primary focus on competences, child-community interaction is also an important pillar of the PYD approach. Children develop in multiple and intersecting contexts, and need intellectual encouragement from parents as well as other adults and peers (Damon & Gregory, 2003). According to the Dutch Youth Institute (NJI), attention increased the past decades towards the multiple domains where youngsters navigate. Various factors in the social environment of youngsters may either support or obstruct their desirable optimal development (NJI, 2018). De Winter (2012) also argues for strengthening the cooperation between parents, schools and other adults in the community when it comes to socializing young people and developing their social capital. Youth work then provides a major opportunity in the need for various actors and facilities in the environment.

The past decades, interventions increasingly paid attention to factors fostering the positive development of youngsters. Programs were not only designed to prevent problems anymore, but also to increase the possibilities of youth and their caregivers. NJI (2018) identified ten protective factors to take into consideration in positive upbringing. Several of these factors stem from the PYD approach. Other factors from this top ten come from the Social Development model (Hawkins & Weis, 1985), the Pedagogical Civil Society (De Winter, 2012; Kesselring, 2012) and the Developmental Assets framework (Benson et al., 1997). Those factors from the

PYD approach are: binding with others in the environment, competence building, self-efficacy, promoting positive behavior, and offering opportunities for participation.

1.3 Combining PYD and IGC to counter polarization

The purpose of this research is to integrate the pedagogical Positive Youth Development approach and the social psychological intergroup contact theory into a comprehensive framework for the prevention of polarization. These are two major, but distinct ways in which polarization is currently mitigated, and according to literature and practice there is no concrete framework which deliberately combines these approaches. A combination of these approaches, which could be called an *Intergroup Positive Youth Development* approach, might be beneficial and feasible. After all, speaking in terms of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of polarization, these could be mitigated simultaneously by such combined approach. The vertical frustrations towards society could hypothetically be mitigated by PYD aspects of self-efficacy and a positive environment, and horizontal segregation and distrust could be overcome by facilitating IGC.

It seems thus that polarization among youngsters could be mitigated by offering them opportunities to develop themselves, acquire life skills and become active partners in society. This could take place through youth work activities with youngsters from different backgrounds, with opportunities to work on common goals together and interact positively. The focus here would lay on the positive development of youngsters, while implicitly facilitating intergroup contact. After all, literature stated that it is more beneficial to focus on commonalities than starting interventions with addressing differences and explicitly trying to overcome adversity (van Wonderen, 2019).

This research aims to assess whether a combination of these approaches is regarded as beneficial and feasible by youth work professionals and other experts. If so, this framework could serve as an extension of possibilities within youth work to counter negative polarization and eventually extremism by fostering better intergroup attitudes, as well as helping youngsters to develop personally. This leads us to the following research question and sub-questions;

Could an *Intergroup Positive Youth Development* approach be effective in order to counter problematic polarization among youngsters (15-25), according to youth professionals?

- How are the vertical and horizontal dimensions of polarization related?

- What do experts consider the most important aspects of IGC and PYD to tackle polarization?
- How do practitioners evaluate a possible combined approach?
- To what extent is such approach being conducted already?

2. Method

2.1 *Procedure*

For this thesis, a qualitative research method with semi-structured interviews was chosen. The objective was to extensively capture respondents' views and practices regarding polarization and the approaches to counter this.

I first conducted a literature study in order to explore and define the relevant concepts related to polarization. Central concepts investigated in the literature study include 'polarization', 'positive youth development', 'intergroup theory', 'polarization and radicalization', 'youth work and polarization' and 'countering polarization'. The most used databases were Google Scholar, Web of Science, regular Google search for certain reports, and partly also course literature from the master program Youth, Education and Society at Utrecht University. From this literature, several factors and processes that might reinforce polarization were identified, as well as the possible approaches to mitigate these processes.

In order to access respondents, I conducted snowball sampling. The targeted respondents were youth workers and other professionals who work with youth in the defined age range (15-25), as well as experts and researchers in the fields of polarization and youth work.

First, I approached several professionals and experts in my network, and posted and shared a call on LinkedIn. The initially contacted people could provide new contacts to approach for interviews, and also after the LinkedIn post several people contributed to the snowball sampling by mentioning possible respondents. These were contacted personally through LinkedIn or e-mail, were informed with a formal information letter, and declared consent through SignRequest.

Interviews were conducted online through videocalls of which the audio was recorded. At the beginning of the interviews, participants were shown working definitions of the central concepts of polarization, intergroup contact and Positive Youth Development, in order to be fully informed and create a common basis for the interviews. These were slightly more

extensive than the definitions from literature, in order to capture all aspects relevant for the research questions. These definitions can be found in the appendix and were approved by the interviewed experts.

2.2 Participants

The final sample of participants consisted of 13 professionals based in the Netherlands. Among those, 8 of them were youth workers or project coordinators, and 5 were experts on the topic of polarization and social disintegration. Several participants had expertise in both youth work and polarization. All interviews were in Dutch except one.

2.3 Instrumentalization

A list of interview questions was developed with the aim to investigate the most important insights from experts and practitioners about how to counter polarization, and the roles that the different approaches and a combined approach could play. This interview outline is included in the appendix.

The participants were asked about their own experiences with polarization, in the whole society as well as specifically within their activities. I asked them about causes of polarization, taking into account the two dimensions of polarization and the relation between them. I asked which approaches they considered useful in countering polarization, and the roles that IGC and PYD could play. After investigating these approaches separately, they were asked about a connection between, and a combination of both these approaches.

After transcribing the interviews, these transcripts were coded with the online program NVivo. The coded statements were then analyzed and bundled according to the structure of the thesis, after which they were summarized into conclusive insights.

3. Interview results

3.1 Experiencing polarization

First, it is important to note that respondents did not always perceive polarization as negative, and that “to a certain extent it means that people are expressing their opinions and frustrations” (Respondent 11, personal communication, May, 13, 2021) or that “polarized debates could even be necessary for marginalized groups in order to accomplish societal change” (Respondent 10, personal communication, May, 7, 2021). Some respondents also stated that not the whole

society is super polarized, but that the most extreme voices are often the loudest, while the majority of the people still belong to the silent and nuanced middle.

Respondents identified the currently most important polarized topics and fault lines as urban versus rural, elite versus the people, social-economic or ethnic backgrounds, opinions towards the pandemic, but also street culture and youth versus police. Such divisions were said to not be tense continuously, but tensions intensify from time to time according to certain events.

Besides these nuances, all respondents did experience a rather negative trend in polarization the past years. Some manifestations of negative polarization were identified as: decreased willingness to listen to each other, harsher public debate, more distance and opposition between certain groups, people being put up against each other, being less able to look at commonalities instead of differences, and categorizing each other in either one group or another without any option in between. Also, some respondents observed that it seemed like people live in alternative realities where people do not understand why another person would have certain different opinions. This polarization was often mentioned to be particularly visible on social media, where people often do not hold back to express very controversial statements.

Youngsters were said to be extra vulnerable for polarization. According to most respondents they are very influenceable by what they see in the media and social media, and are more sensible to group formation and peer pressure. A couple respondents said it is part of being young to have strong opinions, and also identity formation was often mentioned to be part of polarization among youngsters. As one respondent stated:

They might be labeled a certain way by society, as difficult or underprivileged for example, and will then embrace that label and act upon it. Some of these labels and actions might then put them even more apart from other groups or from society in general. (Respondent 1, personal communication, April, 17, 2021)

Thus, most respondents think polarization is not always problematic and has not severely damaged the whole society yet. However, the increased concern about polarization of the past years was perceived legitimate because the negative aspects are becoming more visible, which might lead to societal distrust or radicalization.

3.2 Causes for polarization

Respondents identified various explanations for polarization among both youngsters and adults. These underlying causes were categorizable in either the vertical or horizontal dimension of

polarization. The ones I refer to as vertical involve frustrations about one's own life, deprivation, and not being taken seriously. The horizontal ones are related to distance between groups and the resulting misunderstanding.

3.2.1 Vertical polarization

Most respondents argued that a major part of polarization is primarily targeted towards society in general and institutions. According to them, this vertical polarization is mostly a result of discontent and frustration about one's own life, and perceived disadvantage or inequality of opportunity. Various causes for these attitudes were mentioned in the interviews: feelings of not being heard, not mattering, having no political influence, not being taken seriously and not being embraced by society, or experiencing the inability to give meaning to their lives, find a job or housing and decide about their own future. Several respondents mentioned that people could feel like they are victims of 'the system' which works against them. In turn, this would make these people reject and oppose this society, and in some cases become radicalized.

These issues were also broadly considered to be at play among youngsters; they might be growing up in an environment where nobody ever involved them or showed interest in their background and beliefs. One of the respondents also mentioned fear of failure, which might even be reinforced by society:

In a lot of deprived areas, the education system is aimed at escaping that neighborhood; you are successful if you are able to leave. But what kind of message is that towards the youngsters who stay there? It means that if you stay in that neighborhood, you have failed. That is also how you create frustration. (Respondent 6, personal communication, April, 24, 2021)

All respondents acknowledged that tackling polarization requires a large focus on these vertical frustrations. I will elaborate on how to do this later on, but first I will explore the horizontal dimension of polarization.

3.2.2 Horizontal polarization

Most respondents experienced the horizontal dimension of polarization as a case of segregation and in-group dynamics, rather than frequent negative confrontations with other groups. They stated that it is a rather natural reflex to connect with people who are similar, especially among youngsters looking for their identity. Respondents did not perceive this as necessarily problematic, but observed that people have become less able to come out of their peer group

and are thus limited to their own ‘filter bubble’, where they are mostly confronted with views and opinions they already agree with. Some respondents also experienced this tendency on social media, where like-minded people find each other and reaffirm certain ideas, a process which is also reinforced by algorithms. One respondent explained the polarizing effect of ingroup dynamics as follows: “ingroups might become more radical if they become too exclusive and reject people who are moderate. Because of polarity, those people might then be driven towards the other pole, creating even more distance, mutual distrust and misunderstanding” (Respondent 11, personal communication, May, 7, 2021).

Besides this ingroup dynamic, another often stated cause of horizontal polarization was the lack of communication between different groups. Respondents observed inability and anxiousness among people to communicate with other groups, and limited opportunities to meet others with different views. An often mentioned example was the way neighborhoods are designed, which reinforces distance and segregation without places to meet. Also, some respondents argued that schools often attract particular socio-economic or cultural categories of students. A couple respondents also stated that in remote or isolated communities, it is largely a matter of simply not knowing what is outside their environment. Youngsters there would then base their views on what they see in the media and what they hear from their parents, which might not always be adequate.

These processes were said to make it harder for people to understand why others, outside their own bubble and with a different perception of reality, might have different views. This becomes problematic if people do not want to listen to each other’s perspective, feel attacked fast, or do not trust other groups anymore.

Respondents thus argued that because of either vertical frustrations or horizontal distance, polarization could take place towards the system and institutions, as well as towards other groups within society. These tendencies bear the risk to lead to marginalization, fear, animosity and social disintegration.

3.3 Relation between vertical and horizontal polarization

All respondents argued that vertical discontent and horizontal relations are interrelated in several ways. Feelings of deprivation, powerlessness and not being embraced by society have an effect on how people relate to their own group, as well as to other groups.

Most respondents stated that if people feel deprived and insecure about their situation, they will lean more towards their own group to seek security and safety among people they understand. Also, when people do not feel embraced by society, they might reject this society and look for belonging within a certain group. A few respondents also mentioned identity threat, which pushes people to look for stronger positive identity in groups if their identity is not being appreciated. Another example mentioned was that if people disagree with the system, they will look for likeminded people and again form a group. Several also argued that in general contexts of uncertainty, groups will hold on to each other stronger, which makes it increasingly difficult to let go again. The polarizing consequence of these dynamics would then be that ingroups reinforce themselves, become more exclusive and oppose other groups.

Respondents also argued that vertical uncertainty not only influences in-group dynamics, but also has an effect on how people relate to other groups. An often mentioned example was that when people experience uncertainty and frustration about their situation, they are likely to seek scapegoats to blame for this situation because it is easier than changing the system. One respondent also said that if people reject society for any reason, they might then also reject people belonging to this society. These processes of blaming and rejecting others then contribute to more horizontal polarization.

Thus, most of the respondents stated that if vertical frustrations are not being addressed, people will manifest these on the horizontal axis. Feelings of powerlessness and a lack of grip on the system make people look for security in their own group and put the blame on other groups. As one of the respondents stated: “Both groups want to throw bricks at the system, but if they can’t do this properly, they end up throwing bricks at each other” (Respondent 7, personal communication, April 28, 2021).

3.4 Tackling polarization

Because the different dimensions of polarization have specific causes, tackling them requires specific adequate strategies. Respondents testified what they considered the most important aspects from the IGC and PYD approaches.

3.4.1 Intergroup contact

Respondents considered **IGC** an important approach to tackle polarization because it strengthens people on how to deal with diversity. After all: “diversity is the reality we live in, so we will have to do it together” (Respondent 13, personal communication, May 13, 2021).

All respondents said that getting to know different kinds of people might make people look beyond their perceived differences, and notice commonalities instead. Communicating and listening properly was considered essential to create better understanding of different perspectives, make people realize that some clichés are not true, and eventually overcome scapegoating. In the interviews, several aspects were identified to be important when facilitating IGC; **activities, conditions, differences and conflict**;

Shaping IGC activities

Most respondents agreed that participants should work together on common goals or challenges. Reasons were that people get to know each other better, experience each other's talents, and will not focus on things that pull them apart. Moreover, a couple respondents mentioned that it becomes easier to discuss sensitive topics if people still need each other in a team.

Respondents also often advised to make people rather have low barrier dialogue than difficult conversations. This way, they get to know each other and have the opportunity to develop friendships. Nonetheless, addressing controversial topics where needed was still recommended, so youngsters can learn that there are different views. Therefore, positive relationships were considered important because as one respondent stated: "if they already know somebody from 'the other' positively, they will accept it if this person shares their personal perspectives and experiences about a sensitive topic" (Respondent 13, personal communication, May, 13, 2021).

Conditions

Despite these opportunities, bringing people from different groups together might also pose challenges. As one respondent stated:

People do not get their beliefs out of nowhere. They are formed by the position from which they look at society. Perspective is related to their social positions. ... Especially if we look at positions of disadvantage, people are really in need of a positive social identity, which they often find with people who are similar to them. Forcing them to open up and become openminded might not always have the desired effect. (Respondent 10, personal communication, May, 5, 2021)

Therefore, certain conditions have to be taken into account. Most respondents identified the essential ones as: a safe environment where people feel accepted and can be themselves, equal status and power between groups, heterogeneous teams, and carefulness during a gradual, well-

organized process. Also structural positive interaction was often emphasized, because short and superficial contact might do more harm than good. Some respondents also stated that IGC should happen before people are in conflict, because otherwise they might polarize even more.

Addressing differences

Another point of attention during IGC is the extent to which differences between people are being addressed. Several respondents argued that differences should be acknowledged so youngsters learn that differences are normal. Especially talking about identity was considered important, but with the notion that there are multiple layers of identity and that people are more than just their cultural or ethnical background. Most respondents also stated that differences should not be overly emphasized, because then they would be reinforced. Instead, emphasizing commonalities like shared values, talents or interests was considered to create more connection.

Approaching conflict

There might exist underlying tensions between certain groups. Respondents argued that, if mediated properly, polarization could be an opportunity to address concerns, solve them, and create connection. This might be necessary because: “sometimes you have to address the elephant in the room, otherwise it will keep breaking the furniture” (Respondent 7, personal communication, April, 28, 2021). Respondents prioritized the safe, positive environment where everybody is allowed to share their opinions. After all, some argued that people will not open up to other perspectives if their own concerns are not acknowledged. Not all opinions have to be accepted however, but they should be rather questioned than attacked.

3.4.2 Positive Youth Development

Respondents considered PYD essential to tackle vertical polarization because youngsters want to feel important in society and be able to decide on their own future. Some argued that youngsters might look around and think that society needs change, so the willingness to act is often there. For this, they need certain skills to develop self-efficacy and become citizens in a democratic society. Respondents said youth work can meet these needs through PYD, for example by guiding young people’s desires in a positive way, and facilitating opportunities to grow. The factors of PYD considered most important for tackling polarization could be categorized as **democratic citizenship, competencies and talent for self-efficacy, and an embracing environment.**

Fostering democratic citizenship and resilience

The most mentioned aspect of citizenship was the awareness among youngsters that they can have an impact on their environment and have a role to play in this world. This would make them aware that they do not always have to be angry at the system, and realize that nothing in life comes automatically. Also a positive sense of identity and connection with different layers of identity was considered essential by most respondents. Several also mentioned knowledge about ‘the outer world’, different perspectives and polarization, or about topics like (social) media, misinformation, freedom of speech and democracy. Some respondents advocated for fostering communication skills so youngsters can learn to express their concerns, understand each other better, and deal with disagreements.

Competencies and talents for self-efficacy

Developing (social) skills was considered essential for youngsters to find their own path in life, get a fulfilling job and be self-efficient. Most respondents argued that if youngsters are able to decide about their own future, they would be more confident and less victimized and resentful. Several stated that by participating and exploring different things, youngsters would learn what options there are in life and discover their talents. Talents could include art, through which they can make their voice heard, but also sports, leadership, presenting or working together. Some respondents noted that by taking up tasks and responsibilities, youngsters could realize that they can also serve general interest instead of only their own desires.

Positive social environment

Another essential aspect of PYD is an embracing social environment. For this, most respondents emphasized the importance of approaching youngsters positively by propagating the message that everybody matters, belongs, and has qualities. This would make them feel embraced by society instead of victimized. Several respondents argued to keep supporting youngsters even if they make a mistake because: “it is easy to exclude someone from the group or class if they misbehave, but then they might just drift away even further” (Respondent 6, personal communication, April, 28, 2021). Therefore, terminology like ‘problem youth’ was also considered counterproductive.

Several respondents also stressed the importance of facilitating opportunities for youngsters to do things and grow. If youngsters are bored or isolated for example, activities to get them out of their comfort zone are considered beneficial. Some respondents argued that youngsters

should be actively consulted to message what they need in their environment, so their needs are met and they feel heard.

3.5 Intergroup Positive Youth Development

Respondents discussed the proposed possibility to combine PYD and IGC to tackle polarization, and identified both benefits and challenges.

3.5.1 Benefits and opportunities

A combined framework was broadly considered valuable because the horizontal and the vertical dimension would be addressed simultaneously; it brings different perspectives together through IGC while people grow personally through PYD. This was said to be essential because if vertical frustrations are not addressed, they will remain present and manifest themselves horizontally.

Most respondents argued that by being able to show their talents and contribute to the group, youngsters will feel embraced and respected as individuals. Therefore, they would engage more confidently and honestly in intergroup encounters. Focusing on talents was also approved because these could be subject of conversations and connection.

Also, many respondents stated that if youngsters develop themselves together, they might notice they face similar goals and challenges, which might increase understanding and reduce prejudice. Furthermore, working on common goals in heterogeneous groups was said to create opportunities for youngsters to learn from each other, and so broaden their vision. Some also argued that developing and discovering yourself is a very sensible process, and that being coached and embraced by people with another background could then be very beneficial. After all, someone's background was said to matter less if the focus is development.

Several respondents noted that when intergroup issues emerge while working in heterogeneous groups, these could function as teachable moments to overcome polarization, if guided properly. Some explained that if they need each other for a shared goal, it means that they have to solve such issues. Furthermore, it was argued that already having positive interpersonal connections makes it easier to overcome tensions.

Additionally, a framework like this was also perceived useful to attract youngsters who are not used to 'have voice' and are more difficult to motivate, but might need it the most. After all, several argued that the focus on self-development is more appealing than "these people all come

from different places” (Respondent 13, personal communication, May, 13, 2021), which emphasizes differences and might reinforce polarization.

3.5.2 Challenges and conditions

Several respondents emphasized that if people have too much unaddressed vertical frustrations and feelings of shame or insecurity, they are less likely to open up towards somebody from another group. Therefore, it was considered necessary to respond to certain concerns within their own environment first, in order to build up confidence.

Also, several argued for staying close to personal development, togetherness and positive goals, rather than focusing on intergroup discussions too fast. Respondents considered it essential to have a basis of positive personal relations before getting to difficult topics of polarization.

Furthermore, most respondents emphasized the importance of an accepting environment because as somebody stated: “people have certain principles. If they feel like they are not allowed to have these, they will not feel embraced and will polarize more” (Respondent 10, personal communication, May, 5, 2021). Good guidance, with facilitators who understand where certain opinions come from, was therefore also broadly considered crucial to not let situations escalate.

3.5.3 The combined approach in practice

Respondents testified that these two approaches were not often combined deliberately. They considered such a framework useful to make youth workers aware of the additional possibilities they have to tackle polarization. Within the activities youth workers already do, participants of intergroup activities could benefit from a larger focus on PYD, and competence developing activities could have even more positive effects in heterogeneous groups.

There were cases of initiatives and projects in the Netherlands which did in fact make use of both approaches. *Grensverleggers* for example, was a program bringing together youngsters with different backgrounds to organize events, develop themselves and get to know each other positively, while making use of obstacles in the process to create connections. Also, the vision of *Sociaal Cement* consists of a cycle (see appendix) in which youngsters start by developing their self-efficacy, so they can identify and shape their own ingroup experience. From this knowledge and awareness, they should feel strengthened to confidently relate to other groups and explore diversity. This experience will then reinforce democratic citizenship by learning how to pursue different interests together and deal with polarization. This cycle is complete

when this democratic citizenship again strengthens the initial ingroup. *Stichting Vreedzaam* also fosters competencies for democratic citizenship, and meanwhile uses the approach of ‘bonding and bridging’. In this model, youngsters first connect to their in-group (bonding), before they make the connection to other groups (bridging). Bonding is here thus related to creating an embracing social environment from the PYD approach.

4. Conclusion

Youth work could play an important role in mitigating increasing polarization in society (RAN, 2017; Elich, 2017). This thesis aimed to constitute a framework for youth work activities which could tackle both the vertical and horizontal dimension of polarization simultaneously, by combining the pedagogical Positive Youth Development approach and the social-psychological intergroup contact theory. To investigate the value and feasibility of such combined approach, several professionals and experts were asked about the relation between vertical and horizontal polarization, the most important aspects of PYD and IGC, their evaluation of a combined approach, and the extent to which this is already applied in practice.

The interviews indicated that respondents considered the vertical and horizontal dimension to be interrelated. They argued that if youngsters feel deprived and powerless, it might influence their attitudes positively towards their own group and negatively towards others, possibly resulting in more segregation and distrust. Also, respondents identified various essential building blocks from the PYD and IGC approach to integrate into the combined framework, such as an embracing environment, working together on common goals, and fostering competencies to be self-efficient and less victimized. The professionals considered a combined approach very useful, for example because it brings different perspectives together while letting people grow personally, and thereby addresses both dimensions of polarization simultaneously. Combining these approaches has not explicitly happened yet, but a number of projects utilized aspects of both approaches, or a similar approach like *bonding and bridging*.

These results correspond to the literature in the sense of how respondents experience increasing polarization in society and the processes behind it. The mentioned causes were categorizable as vertical discontent, victimization and frustrations (RAN, 2017; van Wonderen et al., 2019) or as horizontal segregation and processes of group polarization (Borum, 2011; van Wonderen et al., 2020). Respondents also identified several attention points for countering polarization similar to fundamentals in literature; the need to address feelings (Brandsma, 2020), not

emphasizing the extremes (van Wonderen, 2019), and the preference for focusing on commonalities and middle ground (Brandsma, 2020). Also, respondents often had to compromise between approaching youngsters merely as individuals, or as part of their group identity, which corresponds with the notion of group salience (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Al Ramiah, 2013). Furthermore, the respondents gave a practitioners perspective of the essential building blocks of the PYD approach (Benson, 2003; Damon, 2004; youth.gov, 2021) and the IGC theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Al Ramiah, 2013), and how these approaches could constitute a combined framework together.

The responses about a possible Intergroup Positive Youth Development approach reflected the potential value and opportunities stated in the hypothesis, and identified certain challenges and conditions to take into account. Because the two dimensions of polarization were perceived interrelated, respondents considered it necessary to address them both. After all, it was argued that self-efficacy without contact does not bring understanding, and contact while feeling insecure or unequal might even reinforce polarization. This thesis thus clarified how PYD could address vertical polarization, how IGC could mitigate horizontal polarization, and how a combination of both approaches could tackle both dimensions of polarization at once. In Figure 1, I aimed to visualize the underlying logic with a ‘counter-polarization cross’:

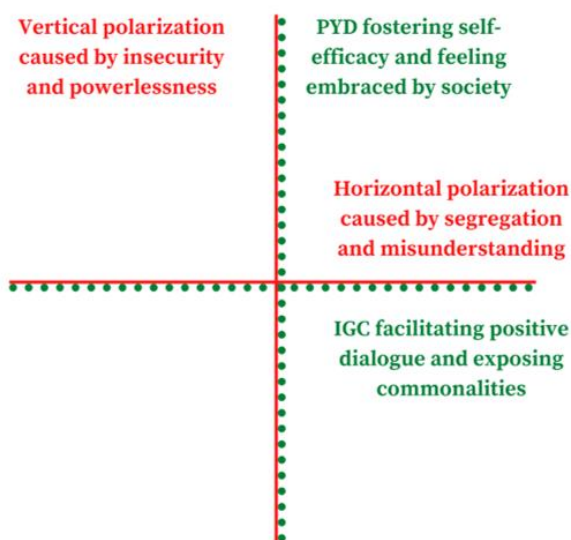


Fig. 1: Polarization is presented here as an aggregate of both the vertical and the horizontal dimension (red lines), which results in a cross. Combining PYD and IGC (green dots), which respectively mitigate the vertical and the horizontal dimension, would then create an overlapping cross which tackles polarization as a whole.

Activities within such approach would then primarily focus on developing talents, skills and resilience, while doing this in heterogeneous groups. Development could then function as a unifying common goal in IGC. Such process responds to the vertical needs, while at the same time emphasizing commonalities rather than differences. This would create an environment which can deal with difficult topics easier if they arise. It is important to note that you can only

facilitate as much contact as the intensity of polarization allows you to. Therefore, the context should be mapped carefully, and the focus on positive empowerment is essential in all stages.

Limitations and further research

The focus on personal development in this thesis might seem very individualistic, as if deprivation and lacking power is only the result of personal incapacity. Of course this is not the case and I did not intend to deny structural inequalities. The personal development in this framework could ideally be a vehicle to achieve social mobility, or to even overcome structural inequality of opportunity.

As we saw however, vertical frustrations could just as much be the result of individual misfortune as of structural group deprivation; even the seemingly most self-efficient people can polarize if they feel identity threat or lack intergroup understanding. For the sake of generalizability of this framework to as many polarized fault lines as possible, it was thus more opportune to seek balance between the group and the individual. How to apply this combined approach to a context of polarized inequality could be an interesting subject for further research.

Furthermore, the most obvious limitation of this research would be that it stays at the theoretical level and has not structurally investigated a concrete implementation of the combined framework at the practical level, which immediately poses a suggestion for further research.

Purpose

By pointing out the possible benefits of combining Positive Youth Development with intergroup contact, I aspired to make youth work practitioners aware of their opportunities to design their activities in such a way they can tackle polarization even more effectively. I hope that by developing themselves together, more youngsters will find their way in life, discover their similarities, be able to cope with their differences, and so come to live in a more understanding world than we do today.

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6. Appendix:

❖ Top ten positive factors for youngsters (NJI, 2018):

1. **Social binding**

Emotional ties and commitments of children and youth with people in their environment. These ties lay the foundations for relations later in life. The quality of those ties is essential in developing and growing up to a healthy adult.

2. **Opportunities for engagement**

Children and youngsters should get the chance to make a concrete, meaningful contribution to their environment, and so acquire interpersonal skills.

3. **Prosocial norms**

It is important for youngsters to grow up in an environment where norms and values for positive behavior are being carried out.

4. **Acknowledgement and appreciation for positive behavior**

Positive affirmation strengthens and motivates youngsters repeat positive behavior.

5. **Support of important adults and facilities in the environment**

Apart from the family, such adults comprise informal adult acquaintances or pedagogical professionals like teachers and youth workers. Children with supportive networks are more resilient towards stressing circumstance and have a better chance to grow up towards healthy adults. Also parents benefit from a good social network, as they are more relaxed, confident and have more positive relationships with their

children. When risk factors occur, an engaged and active social network can also support parents and their children.

Important domains to find these adults are for example youth work or sports clubs. These facilities are also a source for social binding (making friends) and constructive leisure time.

6. Constructive leisure time

This comprises opportunities offered by the environment to participate in for example creative activities and youth programs. Ideally, these facilities promote and support the development of talents and skills. This, in combination with positive relations with peers and adults forms a buffer against risks.

7. Competences

Social competences; concern personal skills which help youngsters integrate their feelings, thoughts and behavior in order to achieve certain social goals. These skills comprise interpreting social signals, solving interpersonal problems and anticipating the consequences of their own behavior.

Emotional competences; concern the ability to identify and adequately react to feelings of themselves and others. This comprises identifying, expressing and controlling behavior.

Behavioral competences; refer to effective behavior like non-verbal and verbal communication, and concrete actions.

8. Cognitive skills

These consist of skills like logical, analytical and abstract thinking, as well as specific skills like reading or math.

9. School motivation and commitment to learning

This regards engagement with learning activities, binding with school and confidence about results and success. This is influenced by parental involvement and motivation, as well as norms and values carried out by the environment and peers.

10. Positive identity

Positive identity concerns how youngsters see themselves regarding the future, self-worth and a sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief that you can achieve personal goals with your behavior. This functions as a determinant for motivation and behavior, the more belief in self-efficacy, the higher their goals and the bigger their motivation to achieve these.

- ❖ Do's and don'ts for youth workers when facilitating intergroup contact (van Wonderen, 2019):

<u>Step 1: Orientation</u>	
<p><i>Do: Map the situation beforehand</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How are relationships between groups? - Have there been confrontations yet? - Invest in 'peacetime' already. 	<p><i>Do not: give attention to 'screamers'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - These are on both sides, but it is more fruitful to focus on the silent majority. - Do not problematize the first signals as if there is heavy conflict already. Do not make the issue bigger than it is.
<u>Step 2: Designing</u>	
<p><i>Do: Foster collaboration between groups.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This makes people have real contact and bridge groups, compose heterogeneous working groups. - Work around common interests or goals, search what the groups share instead of how they differ. - Make sure the groups have equal status. - Facilitate repeated and frequent encounters where ideally friendships could blossom. - Make use of role models. 	<p><i>Do not: Emphasise differences between groups</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Differences are okay, but do not make them separate the groups even more, even if they are addressed positively. - Do not stimulate competition between groups. A connecting activity can have an element of contest, but again use mixed groups. - It is important that the groups really get to know each other and take the other's perspective.

<u>Step 3: Organizing</u>	
<p><i>Do: Try to reach everybody</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People are more likely to join if they are invited personally or by someone they know. - Let them participate voluntarily. - Ensure a good location which is neutral and low-barrier. - Have a good moderator who respects both groups and can draw lines. - Make sure you reach people beyond the immediate target group, and not only the ones who are already interested 	<p><i>Do not: Choose sides</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organizers should be neutral. If you can't be, ask someone else to do this. - Do not call it a meeting-event, but focus on a common interest. - Do not ask money.

Interview questions:

- Can you please introduce yourself?
- Can you describe the organization you are working for?
- What is the main goal of your organization?
- **Here I will shortly explain the core concepts; polarization, intergroup contact and PYD.**
- Do you experience polarizing behavior among youngsters you work with?
- What place does polarization have within your activities? (If affirmative, what kind of approach does your organization use to counter polarization?)
- What ways do you think are effective to counter problematic polarization?
- To what extent does your organization foster 'positive youth development'?

- Which role do you think activities aimed at PYD could play in countering polarization?
- What contribution could an ‘intergroup contact’ approach make in countering polarization according to you?
- When thinking about interventions to counter polarization, what would you take away from both approaches?
- How do you feel about a counter-polarization approach which is aimed at PYD in the first place, and would facilitate intergroup contact implicitly?
- What could be advantages and what could be challenges?
- If they are already using such approach:
- What are the benefits and challenges of such approach?
- What are the effects of such approach?
- To what extent is depolarization a goal within your activities?
- On which approach is your organization based more?

❖ Working definitions for interviews:

Main concepts

Polarization is the hardening of differences between groups in society about various subjects; politics, religion, urban/rural, current affairs,... This can result in mutual tensions and increasing segregation. Polarization and tensions are always present in society and are not necessarily problematic. If polarization gets so bad that it leads to threatening situations, it is problematic

Tensions resulting from polarisation could be horizontal as well as vertical, and can influence each other.

- Horizontal: tensions explicitly towards other groups
- Vertical: discontent about own situation and tensions towards the system

Intergroup contact: This theory/approach is based on the idea that structural contact between different groups of people could reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations. The bottom line of this theory is that if an individual has a positive affective and empathic relation with one

or more individuals of the ‘other’ group, attitudes towards the whole outgroup improve. Interventions based on this approach thus mainly facilitate contact between different groups. This contact can happen in various ways, but needs to be done carefully.

Positive Youth Development is a pedagogical approach aimed at engaging youth with their environment in a constructive and productive manner. The main focus is recognizing and strengthening youth’s talents and providing opportunities to develop and participate in society. The self-efficacy of youngsters is being fostered, as well as gaining social capital. Also important for this approach is the presence of a positive and stimulating learning environment (in a broad sense).

❖ The framework of youth work organization Sociaal Cement:

