

**ANGER MANAGEMENT – CONSIDERATIONS AND REFLECTIONS
USEFUL FOR FIRST LINE PRACTITIONERS
WORKING WITH YOUTH VULNERABLE TO RADICALIZATION**

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Motto: „No one is born with a chronic anger problem. Rather, chronic anger and aggressive response styles are learned”.

Harry Mills

Abstract

Anger is a fundamental emotion. It is also one of the basic human emotions, namely one that is experienced by all people. Fear, anger, sorrow, joy, disgust, acceptance, anticipation, and surprise are among the most cited to take part in the basic emotions range. (Picard, p. 6) Anger is considered a natural and mostly automatic response to adverse acts. The present article will, therefore, look into how to better understand anger, its origins as a basic human emotion, its biological and psychological characteristics, and its place in the life of the individual and of the community, as well as in a cultural system we may share and inherit. Last but not least, it is our intention to identify and describe various strategies and techniques used by educators, coaches and therapists in teaching and promoting anger management and to highlight those strategies and interventions that might also prove useful for the daily routine of different segments of first-liners working with children and youth vulnerable to radicalisation and violent extremism.

Keywords: *management, anger, first line practitioners, radicalisation.*

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Introduction

This study is aimed to serve as a synthetic presentation of the main insights into anger as a basic, secondary emotion, and the various ways in which it can be first managed, then positively harnessed to detour the individual from radicalization and into more functional, constructive ways of asserting personal power and identity. It does not serve as an academic analysis of studies in the field, but rather as a summary of useful concepts, definitions and findings of researchers that have studied both the way anger works and its impact on the physical and psychological health of the individual, as well as his social wellbeing. As such, the study has served as documentary material in the preparation of the experimental lab dedicated to first liners working with vulnerable children and adolescents vulnerable to radicalisation in the framework of the “*Armour project – A radical model of resilience for young minds*”.

Its main purpose is to serve (a) as baseline in building exercises and simulations and (2) as guideline for a better understanding of anger, its role in the radicalisation process and, last but not least, on how anger can be managed, reversed or harnessed and channelled toward positive forms self – affirmation and success.

Definition

Anger is a fundamental emotion. It is also one of the basic human emotions, namely one that is experienced by all people. Fear, anger, sorrow, joy, disgust, acceptance, anticipation, and surprise are among the most cited to take part in the basic emotions range. (Picard, p. 6). Anger is considered a natural and mostly automatic response to adverse acts. “Typically triggered by an emotional hurt, anger is usually experienced as an unpleasant feeling that occurs when we think we have been injured, mistreated, opposed in our long-held views, or when we are faced with obstacles that keep us from attaining personal goals”. (Mills, s.a)

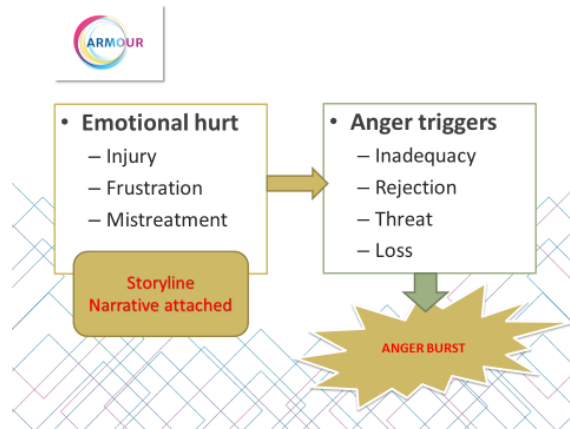


Figure 1 – Anger as second hand emotion (author idea)

This makes it a secondary emotion. The distinction between primary and secondary emotions has been defined as non-cognitively vs cognitively generated emotions. According to Damasio, “primary emotions are those emotions triggered by stimuli in the world that we respond to emotionally and which activate a corresponding set of feelings secondarily. Such emotions are primary and reside in the limbic system” (Damasio apud Picard, p. 1). Damasio defines secondary emotions as “those that arise later in an individual's development when systematic connections are identified between primary emotions and categories of objects and situations”. (Damasio apud Picard, p. 1)

Anger triggers include feeling of inadequacy, rejection, threat, and loss. According to Williams, anger also has two distinct dynamic functions: “on the one hand it works as an inwardly directed signal urging the individual to overcome an adverse action, situation, obstacle; on the other hand, anger is also directed as an outward signal that shapes communication and distances the individual from a certain interlocutor, establishing differentiation and conflict with interpersonal relationships and affective bonds”. (Williams, 2017, p. 1)

Researchers place the phylogenetic origins of anger in the basic reaction to a stressful situation, most likely “a response to a condition of physical constriction as an ultimate way for the individual to free itself from a predator or to an external condition causing pain or irritation”.

(Williams, 2017, p. 5) This basic protective role of anger is then integrated in and supported by the fight-or-flight response.

The dynamics of anger remains difficult to establish and track, however. As part of the basic emotions set identified by the basic emotions' theory¹, it is said to represent a basic emotional signal with pivotal role in e.g. the survival mechanisms. Nevertheless, for anger to enter the area of *emotional experience*, it must be "secondarily represented by higher cognitive systems", that is embedded in and justified by rationally constructed and ethically loaded storylines. Subsequent theories placed basic emotions also at the core of motivated behaviour: "Modern ethology relied on cybernetics to reinterpret instincts in terms of goal corrected behavioural plans that flexibly (unlike the fixed behavioural sequence previously meant to characterize instincts) employ inborn or acquired motor patterns in order to achieve an expected outcome enhancing individual fitness". (Hinde apud Williams, 2017, p. 2)

To summarize, we can state that anger has been researched and explained as (1) a basic emotion driven by instinct, (2) a signal regulating goal corrected behaviours and later on as (3) an affective signal regulating a motivational system which orientates the individual towards a set goal (Lichtenberg apud Williams, 2017, p. 3).

The difficulties in spotting and handling anger come from two different directions: (1) anger can be generated by a negative stimulus (e.g. hurt, frustration) and directed towards solving tensions; (2) anger behaviours can result in behaviours that are similar with those sustained by positive emotions (personal empowerment, agency etc.). (Panksep apud Williams, 2017, p. 5)

Anger in the life of the individual

Anger does not emerge until the end of the first year of life of the individual (Sroufe apud Williams, 2017, p. 5) and it is linked to the stage in which the subject begins to understand when his/her actions are

¹ "The basic emotions theory states the existence of basic schemes of automatic response named emotions, used to increase survival by facilitating the communication between co-specifics" (Eckman apud Williams, 2017, p. 2)

blocked and how it can overcome them (potentially fuelled by anger). Subsequently, *self-awareness and social awareness* are used to direct anger towards self or others. Nevertheless, “the degree to which rage becomes a part of the individual way to exert one’s control upon the external world, conflict management and social assertiveness is much influenced by the actual social experience and interpretations that the caregivers offer to the child’s behaviours as well as by the wider social context of social norms and established meaning”. (Williams, 2017, p. 6)

It is also important to distinguish between anger and irritation, hostility, aggression, and violence. According to Thomas, anger is “a strong, uncomfortable emotional response to a provocation that is unwanted and incongruent with one’s values, beliefs, or rights”. (Thomas, 2001, p. 42) By contrast, Thomas describes hostility as “a chronic mistrustful negative attitude”, while aggression moves forward to “actual or intended harming of another”. (Thomas, 2001, p. 42)

Other authors, however, treat this range of feelings in a continuum. “Some researchers consider that hostility, anger and aggression can represent the cognitive, affective and behavioural components of the same multidimensional construct (Buss & Perry, 1992). Thus, the construct could consist of three basic dimensions: a) affective, made up of emotions such as anger or loathing; b) cognitive, consisting mainly of negative thoughts about human nature, resentment, and cynical distrust; and c) behavioural, defined by various forms of aggression, such as physical or verbal aggression. All these factors seem to be related to each other, varying in intensity, frequency, and duration”. (Valizadeha et. al., 2010)

Anger thresholds and ways of expression

The anger threshold may also differ significantly from one individual to another, but also from one community to another, depending on the social norms attached to its expression: “The experience of anger varies widely; how often anger occurs, how intensely it is felt, and how long it lasts are different for each person. People also vary in how easily they get angry (their anger threshold), as well as how comfortable they are with feeling angry. Some people are always getting angry while others seldom feel angry. Some people are

very aware of their anger, while others fail to recognize anger when it occurs. Some experts suggest that the average adult gets angry about once a day and annoyed or peeved about three times a day. Other anger management experts suggest that getting angry fifteen times a day is more likely a realistic average. Regardless of how often we actually experience anger, it is a common and unavoidable emotion". (Mills, s.a)

Anger and culture

Research on emotions has taken many paths. Some studies have focused on positivist and biological interpretations, others, more recent, have also focused on understanding emotions as part of culturally specific models and theories of beliefs. Both highlight important aspects not only for the understanding of emotion expressions in context, but also for how they can be further positively handled.

Theories of emotion recognise that "people are generally more accurate at judging emotions when the emotions are expressed by members of their own cultural group, rather than by members of a different cultural group". (Elfenbein and Ambady, 2003) This is a strong hint towards the need for cultural competence in correctly assessing the nature of the emotion experienced by peers in interaction and calls for cultural awareness whenever one needs to reflect and correctly interpret expressions of emotions, including anger. Therefore, an important aspect to be taken into consideration when evaluating anger expressions is that individuals tend to more keenly understand expressions of emotions in their own community group and sometimes apply the same filter on regarding emotional expressions of individuals and communities that are different and rely on different valorisation. A certain cultural relativism in understanding must be inferred from here as a factor to be kept in balance. Fundamental evidence in this sense has been provided by studies on the perceived expressivity. Thus, researchers have demonstrated that people in different countries and most of all different races have difficulties in "reading" the expressivity of another group. (Matsumoto, 2001)

At the same time, it must be stated that cultural relativism has a limited degree of action in understanding and expressing emotions, and hence its importance should not be overstated. It is not a total obstacle

in assessment. An analysis performed on the judgement of facial expressions of emotions by individuals coming from ten different cultures has highlighted strong evidence of cross-cultural agreement in interpretation. "Agreement was very high across cultures about which emotion was the most intense. The 10 cultures also agreed about the second most intense emotion signalled by an expression and about the relative intensity among expressions of the same emotion. However, cultural differences were found in judgments of the absolute level of emotional intensity". (Ekman, et al.)

Hence, when dealing with expressions of anger from individuals of different ethnic origin and cultural backgrounds, one should be careful in assessing and look for further evidence and clarification before making a statement and/or assessment of intentions. Secondly, studies in cultural anthropology have shown that anger can be stimulated and harnessed in different social and cultural contexts including fighting a war, responding to social conflict and injustice etc. In different cultures and social contexts, anger expressions can be accepted, tolerated, or even fostered to induce change. According to Williams, "behaviours accompanied by anger and rage serve many different purposes and the nuances of aggressive behaviours are often defined by the symbolic and cultural framework and social contexts". (Williams, 2017, p. 1)

The implications put forth in the expression of anger by the symbolic and cultural frameworks are yet to be highlighted according to each distinct social, cultural and individual background. As observed, "interpersonal experiences, cognitive development and cultural meanings can intervene to modify the early interactive representations pertaining each motivational system, but their affective core remains unchanged". (Williams, 2017, p. 3) What can be stated however is that anger does get fuelled when dressed in and motivated by culturally, socially, and ethically loaded significance?

In Western culture however, raw expression of anger is oftentimes considered inappropriate and it is socially sanctioned. According to Mills, "many people are brought up to think that it is inappropriate to express anger directly; that it must not be tolerated; that it is always dangerous. Such people learn to distrust anger, to

bottle it up and ignore it, to express it only in indirect ways or to use it as a weapon". (Mills, s.a)

Studies of emotional experiences in various cultural contexts have also highlighted significant differences in terms of incidence between fear and anger rates of occurrence in Europeans, Japanese and Americans. According to the study, Europeans experience fear and anger more than Americans, who, in their turn, experience these feelings more often than Japanese. (Matsumoto and Juang, 2016, p. 10)

(means)	Europe	Japan	USA	mean	df	F	p	Newman-Keuls
Joy	3.83	3.26	3.48	3.52	2/502	13.38	.0000	JAP<USA<EUR
Sadness	4.07	3.31	3.93	3.78	2/492	22.16	.0000	JAP<EUR=USA
Fear	4.03	3.30	3.85	3.73	2/487	18.56	.0000	JAP<EUR=USA
Anger	3.68	3.19	3.42	3.43	2/497	10.12	.0000	JAP<USA<EUR
Average	3.80	3.16	3.61	3.44	2/507	31.55	.0000	JAP<USA<EUR
Across emotions:								
df	3/687	3/670	3/645	3/2010				
F	3.61	n.s.	7.57	10.00				
p	.0131		.0001	.0000				
Newman-Keuls				Joy = Anger<Fear = Sad				
				Joy = Anger<Fear = Sad				
				Anger<Sad				

Figure 2: Relative incidence of different emotions (Source: [http:// david matsumoto.com/content/1988_Scherer_Walbott_Matsumoto_Kudoh.pdf](http://davidmatsumoto.com/content/1988_Scherer_Walbott_Matsumoto_Kudoh.pdf))

In conclusion, we can state that cultural differences in expressing emotions do appear, at least in the level of frequency they are experienced and the intensity with which they are expressed and perceived. These differences are due to differences in perceptions on events, frameworks of understanding, in culture-specific appraisal propensities, in behaviour repertoires, or in regulation processes. (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992)

Some psychological and sociological aspects of anger

Emotions happen inside. They are part of the intra-psychic activity of the brain, involving perceptions, concerns etc. Nevertheless, they also have a very distinct social component, being expressed in and directly affecting social interactions. (Parrott, 2001, p. 6) As a highly negative emotion, anger is experienced by all individuals, yet the strategies used for its expression – action, venting, burial, denial etc. – are differently valorised and instrumentalised depending on social and cultural context.

Psychological containing and later on denying of anger, for instance, can be encouraged and enforced by social taboos, yet it can have very serious consequences in personality disorders as “(...) everyday life experiences as well as clinical insights into psychopathic, narcissistic and borderline personality pathology clearly illustrate the necessity to correctly interpret and give answers to the basic questions raised around the topic of anger as a basic emotion”. (Williams, 2017, p. 1)

Among the effects highlighted by Williams, we state collateral expression of anger, destruction of relationships, impact on physical and emotional health and wellbeing. It is also associated with early mortality, alienation of family, friends, co-workers.

On the other hand, the experience of pain, once associated with an anger triggering thought leads to the experiencing of anger; anger triggering thoughts include, according to Mills, “personal assessments, assumptions, evaluations, or interpretations of situations that make people think that someone else is attempting (consciously or not) to hurt them”.

However, since anger is a secondary emotion that can only be experienced once associated with a certain storyline, the good news is that once the individual becomes aware of his stereotypical thought pattern, or of his/her tendency to interpret reality in a certain threatening way, the story can be reversed and the energy unleashed by anger rechannelled for self-assertiveness, effective self-protection and positive social change.

Given the narrative necessary to embed anger and the need for various subjects to role-play in it, anger has also been characterised as a social emotion. “In this sense, anger is a social emotion; you always

have a target that your anger is directed against (even if that target is yourself). Feelings of pain, combined with anger-triggering thoughts motivate you to take action, face threats and defend yourself by striking out against the target you think is causing you pain". (Mills, s.a.)

Anger can also be featured as a substitute emotion. People get angry so as not to feel pain, a change which can be done consciously or unconsciously. This way, one is distracted from feeling pain and channels thoughts toward harming those that have caused them pain (Mills, s.a.). Hence, we can better understand the link inherently created between anger and the process of radicalisation. Based on the existence of an individual or social trauma, collective empathy and feeling of loss, radicalisation implies stigmatisation of another that needs to be scapegoated so as to revenge a perceived injustice. Hence, anger affliction towards a designated collective or individual enemy. "Anger thus temporarily protects people from having to recognize and deal with their painful real feelings; you get to worry about getting back at the people you're angry with instead. Making yourself angry can help you to hide the reality that you find a situation frightening or that you feel vulnerable". (Mills, s.a.)

"In addition to providing a good smoke screen for feelings of vulnerability, becoming angry also creates a feeling of righteousness, power and moral superiority that is not present when someone is merely in pain. When you are angry, you are angry with cause. For radicalising individuals, anger offers the necessary psychological motivation to adhere to an extremist ideology and become its advocate. This transforms anger into bravery and violence into bravery displayed for a higher end. "The people who have hurt me are wrong – they should be punished" is the common refrain. It is very rare that someone will get angry with someone they do not think has harmed them in some significant fashion". (Mills, s.a.)

Thus, when discussing anger, we need to recognise it as THE ROOT CAUSE OF ANY RADICALISATION PROCESS. Fostering self-awareness, recognition of anger processes and recognition of baseline feelings of anger and hurt can therefore be instrumental in the reinstatement of positive self-perceptions and a meaningful life goal! Whether justified or unjustified, the seductive feeling of righteousness

associated with anger offers a powerful temporary boost to self-esteem. (Mills, s.a) “The adrenaline-caused arousal that occurs during anger lasts a very long time (many hours, sometimes days), and lowers our anger threshold, making it easier for us to get angry again later on. Though we do calm down, it takes a very long time for us to return to our resting state. During this slow cool-down period we are more likely to get very angry in response to minor irritations that normally would not bother us”. (Mills, s.a.) During the radicalisation process, similar indicators can signal an embrace of violence.

Also, the memory related aspect is very similar “High levels of arousal (such as are present when we are angry) significantly decrease your ability to concentrate. This is why it is difficult to remember details of really explosive arguments”. (Mills, s.a.)

Anger management

At a biological level, when angered, an individual experience a raise in blood -pressure and stress hormones flows which may trigger extreme violence. Where is anger born? “Emotions more or less begin inside two almond-shaped structures in our brains which are called the amygdala. The amygdala is the part of the brain responsible for identifying threats to our well-being, and for sending out an alarm when threats are identified that result in us taking steps to protect ourselves. The amygdala is so efficient at warning us about threats, that it gets us reacting before the cortex (the part of the brain responsible for thought and judgment) is able to check on the reasonableness of our reaction. In other words, our brains are wired in such a way as to influence us to act before we can properly consider the consequences of our actions”. (Mills, s.a.)

Anger management – born or learnt?

Anger management does not come by instinct. Learning it properly is a skill that must be learned, instead of something we are born with. It is related to how we place threshold and to a complex interplay with other emotions. Anger can be either a constructive or a destructive emotion, depending on its goal setting system

manifestation. When well harnessed, anger can be an effective fuel of self-empowerment, “healthy narcissism” (Ronningstam apud Williams, 2017, 6), fostering autonomy and agency towards achievement of goals, managing conflicts, defending own boundaries and integrity etc.

Anger and rage have also been noted as “necessary instruments to re-establish a feeling of personal consistency and autonomy or to endure in a goal pursuit when a failure is experienced”. (Williams, 2017, p. 6) “At its roots, anger is a signal to you that something in your environment isn't right. It captures your attention and motivates you to take action to correct that wrong thing”. (Mills) When balanced by empathy, acknowledgment of the affective bonding with the opponent, respect, and regulation of behaviour according to ethical and social norms, anger remains in the sphere of benign expressions and interactions. Whether one ends up, harnessing anger signals or being harnessed by them becomes then of uttermost importance, with consequences in the success of social interactions, creating social bonds, professional accomplishment, health, and wellbeing. When asking what to do with our anger, researchers pinpoint to different mechanisms of coping which include: displacement, repression, suppression, ineffective expression, effective expression.

Anger displacement	When placed on a different person/object than the focus of anger itself – it happens when anger with the primary target is considered unsafe; it provides a release in tension on the short term; may have strong negative consequences in the long term – spoil relationships, hamper effective learning, damage self-esteem, produce depression etc.
Anger repression	In order to be controlled, anger is buried in the subconscious and unconscious levels of the psyche. Then, anger affects behaviour, although we are unaware of its influence and involvement in causing angry outbursts

Anger suppression	The subject is aware of his/her anger but consciously chooses not to express it, e.g. for fear not to hurt someone or when this would place us in danger. Then, most likely, a mismatch will be generated between verbal and non-verbal messages and the non-verbal will be perceived as more powerful. Alternatively, it may burst later on. Hence, the need to learn appropriate ways to express negative feelings altogether.
Ineffective expression of anger	Destructive and aggressive ways of expressing strong emotions. Escalates hostility and damages relationships. May result in danger to another person or to ourselves.
Effective expression of anger	Expression with respect to other people's feelings and perspectives. It involves communicating concerns while still respecting other people's right to alternative views

Table 1: Different mechanisms of coping anger (Source: Adapted from Faupel, Adrian; Heric, Elizabeth; Sharp, Peter M., Anger Management: A Practical guide for Teachers)

How to express anger healthily

“Anger is also a critically important part of what might be called the self-preservation and self-defence instincts. People who are incapable of getting angry are also incapable of standing up for themselves. It is important then that people learn how to express anger appropriately. People need to learn healthy and socially respectful ways to express angry feelings, and to not to let anger get out of control to the point where it negatively affects relationships, employability and health”. (Mills, s.a.)

“It is more satisfying to feel angry than to acknowledge the painful feelings associated with vulnerability. You can use anger to convert feelings of vulnerability and helplessness into feelings of control and power. Some people develop an unconscious habit of transforming almost all their vulnerable feelings into anger so they can

avoid having to deal with them. The problem becomes that even when anger distracts you from the fact that you feel vulnerable, you still at some level feel vulnerable. Anger cannot make pain disappear – it only distracts you from it. Anger generally does not resolve or address the problems that made you feel fearful or vulnerable in the first place, and it can create new problems, including social and health issues”. (Braaton, s.a)

Interventions include:

Relaxation-based interventions: Relaxation interventions target emotional and physiological components of anger. Most of these interventions teach clients relaxation coping skills, provide training in applying these skills within sessions, and use homework to facilitate transfer. Theoretically, as clients learn to lower emotional and physiological arousal, they are in a calmer position from which to think clearly and access problem solving, conflict management, and other skills with which to address sources of anger and frustration.

Cognitive interventions: Cognitive interventions target anger-engendering “cognitive processes such as hostile appraisals and attributions, irrational beliefs, aggression-supporting expectancies, ineffective problem solving, and inflammatory thinking”. Alternative cognitions are developed and rehearsed within sessions, and homework transfers application to real-life events. Anger arousal is lowered as events are construed in less hostile ways and thinking is calmer and controlled. Cognitive interventions may take the form of self-instructional approaches – to guide themselves through provocation, ways of challenging negative attributions, rational reappraisal and *decatastrophization*, coping self-statements, and self-reinforcement of coping. These new self-instructions are rehearsed within sessions to lower anger and then are transferred to external events via homework.

Cognitive restructuring – assisting clients in identifying biased information. The therapeutic styles may vary from the more rational, deductive approach of rational-emotive therapy to the more inductive, Socratic style of Beck’s cognitive therapy; cognitive-restructuring approaches assist clients in identifying the biased information

processing and distorted beliefs that engender dysfunctional anger and forms of anger expression. Clients explore the errors in these cognitive processes and develop calmer, more logical, and reality-based cognitive responses. These are rehearsed within and between sessions for anger management.

Problem solving: Clients are, therefore, taught the general steps of problem solving (e.g., problem orientation, breaking problems down, resource review, generation of alternatives, implementation of a plan, etc.) and practice applying them to anger and conflict.

Social skills interventions: Individuals with anger problems often behave abrasively and react impulsively and antagonistically in the face of interpersonal provocation. They tend to engage others in verbal and physical aggression and to express themselves in less controlled and constructive ways in dealing with interpersonal difficulties. Social skills approaches address these aggressive, dysfunctional means of dealing with anger and attempt to provide angry individuals with conflict management skills such as recognizing the impact of their behaviour on others, taking time out, and developing listening and feedback skills, assertion, and interpersonal negotiation. As these skills are deployed, anger is reduced as the person communicates more effectively and aborts or reduces cycles of escalating conflict and anger.

Combined interventions: Several interventions integrate two or more intervention components and target multiple elements of anger. For example, cognitive-relaxation interventions focus on cognitive, physiological, and emotional components of anger with both cognitive and relaxation approaches. Other interventions combine cognitive and behavioural interventions, and still others integrate all three. (Deffenbacher et. al., 2002)

Conclusions

This limited study looks into how to better understand anger, its origins as a basic human emotion, its biological and psychological characteristics, and its place in the life of the individual and of the community, as well as in a cultural system we may share and inherit. Last but not least, it was our intention to identify and describe various

strategies and techniques used by educators, coaches and therapists in teaching and promoting anger management and to highlight those strategies and interventions that might also prove useful for the daily routine of different segments of first-liners working with children and youth vulnerable to radicalisation and violent extremism. Further study is required to test and calibrate anger management strategies and interventions to the needs of youth vulnerable to radicalisation. The ARMOUR project will therefore investigate potentially useful strategies and calibrate them to the use of the practitioners by carrying out experimental laboratories in Romania, Italy, Spain, Germany, Greece, Malta and The Netherlands.

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