Article

Adolescence as a "Radical" Age and Prevention of Violent Radicalisation: A Qualitative Study of Operators of a Juvenile Penal Circuit in Italy

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Abstract: In the scientific community, the topic of the risk of violent radicalisation within the juvenile penal circuit is infrequently explored compared to the attention devoted to the adult prison population or to other areas of social and educational intervention. This article presents some results of a study conducted, within the framework of a European project led by the Italian Ministry of Justice, at some institutions of the juvenile penal circuit in Italy, with the involvement of staff working at the Offices of Social Services for Minors (USSM), the Juvenile Penal Institutes (IPM), and the reception communities of two Italian regions (North and South). The article aims to explore the viewpoint of the professionals working in these facilities, analysing their perceptions and experiences regarding the radicalisation of young people in the penal circuit. This concept is understood both in a broader sense, evoking the characteristics of adolescence, as experienced by the population in their charge, and also in the more specific sense of religious radicalisation and its possible violent outcomes. The article shows how, when referring to the task of detecting possible signs of (violent) radicalisation in the behaviour of young people, penal-circuit professionals highlight the difficulties and risks they encounter in the attempt to reconcile educational and supervisory tasks. The personal and social characteristics of the population under their care and the more specific characteristics of the adolescent phase, in fact, seem to constitute factors that make the process of the detection of radicalisation more complex, with the risk of increasing the labelling and stigmatisation of these young offenders, thus, paradoxically, favouring outcomes that would be desirable to prevent.

Keywords: juvenile penal circuit; penitentiary operators; radicalisation; adolescence

1. Introduction

In the last twenty years, in the wake of the well-known events in the United States, in some European nations, and beyond, the subject of jihadist radicalisation has been at the centre of reflections on and elaborations of operational practices by international, European, and national institutions. Alongside a more securitarian dimension, linked to intelligence actions aimed at the identification and countering of possible risks and violent manifestations, another dimension has emerged that is more focused on the prevention, on the one hand, and early detection, on the other, of possible signs of radicalisation. Several European countries have undertaken programmes to implement the objectives and guidelines formulated in these areas by international organisations (the United Nations, the European Commission, and the OSCE—Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe), involving different sectors of their institutions, from the security field to the social, educational and scholastic domains, calling into action the front-line operators in the field precisely for the tasks of prevention and early detection (Vallinkoski and Benjamin 2023).

The academic community, in the field of political, psychological, and social sciences, actively participated in this debate, questioning the very concept of radicalisation and its critical aspects, its aetiological dynamics and manifestations, and its links to terrorist

acts. Sociologists and psychologists, in particular, have tried to identify the cultural, social, and psychological drivers, as well as the risk and protective factors, and the triggers that favour or, on the contrary, protect against progression in the radicalisation process and, further, the transition to violent action. These progressions, moreover, are not considered as unambiguous and one-sided directions, but as different paths, open to different outcomes (Borum 2011; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008, 2017); sometimes, they are not entirely predictable. Some of the most influential theoretical models in the scientific community have therefore emphasised the importance of taking a multi-level and multi-factor perspective (see, among others, Khosrokhavar 2014, 2017; Fadil et al. 2019).

Moreover, recent publications (Van de Weert and Eijkman 2019, 2020a, 2020b) have demonstrated the lack of a definite link between outward manifestations of ideas, dispositions, and behaviour and their violent outcomes. Consequently, the uncertainty regarding indications and operational guidelines makes the job of professionals, who are charged with the task of detecting the signs of violent radicalisation at an early stage, very complicated. According to the authors of these studies, professionals are necessarily guided in this task by their own personal impressions and evaluations. Therefore, it is relevant to investigate the views and experiences of these personnel, in order to understand the assumptions on and trajectories through which they operate in the process of countering violent radicalisation.

2. For a Situated Approach to the Study of Violent Radicalisation

Taking a culturally, historically, and socially situated approach makes it possible to account not only for the variability that occurs between individuals and along their respective life trajectories, but also for the differences that a phenomenon can assume at different historical moments and in different geographical and social contexts.

A reasonable amount of scientific studies have been published on the violent radicalisation of adolescents (for a review in this area, see, for example, Jahnke et al. 2022), and, in European countries in particular, of those from migrant backgrounds. Among these studies, the socio-developmental model by Beelmann (2020) proposes to take into account the deviant ontogenetic processes that are produced in the relationship between different individual, relational, and social variables, in childhood and adolescence, and which then interact with the proximal factors that have been associated with radicalisation processes. An important role seems to be played by both the complex dynamics of identity and their confrontation with discriminatory and prejudicial experiences in everyday life. Finally, according to this model, political, religious, or ideological content would constitute a kind of explanation of their experiences and a legitimisation of their will to react. Khosrokhavar (2014, 2017) elaborates on these experiences of young people from migrant backgrounds in European cities, which, on the one hand, lead to them feeling the burden and stigma of (social, economic, cultural, political) marginalisation processes, in which might be defined as "Islam of the oppressed" (Khosrokhavar 2004; Rhazzali 2010). On the other hand, these very experiences lead young people to construct a "Supermuslim" self-image (Benslama 2016) and to an identification, which they perceive as the only way out of their predicament, with a group or an idealised community, in this case, that of Muslims (Khosrokhavar 2014), for which, in the most extreme cases, they sacrifice everything else, adhering to a narrative of violence as a heroic mission (Guolo 2015).

An open debate in the social sciences concerns the possibility or probability that the prison context is an incubator of radicalisation processes, through the proselytising activities of inmates and the conditions of discomfort and disorder that characterise some prison settings. The debate spread in the US, in Europe, and in other countries, including in the Arab world, particularly in the wake of the alerts raised by national and international security agencies. Some researchers tend to highlight this risk as significant (among others, Roy 2017), while others, without denying the possibility of its significance, dismiss its significance (see, e.g., Hamm 2013; Khosrokhavar 2013; Decker and Pyrooz 2019). Furthermore, other scholars prefer to investigate how some prison subcultures paradoxically

also succeed in curbing the risk of the radicalisation of inmates, through case studies and in-depth interviews with inmates and prison staff (Bucerius et al. 2023).

Among the international scientific publications about jihadist radicalisation in the prison context, however, empirical research focusing on juvenile justice appears to be lacking, even though it is of particular interest with regard to the prevention and early identification of radicalisation processes, which, as mentioned above, affect the young population particularly strongly. Among the rare research that focuses on the juvenile penal system, we found a significant paper (Bonelli and Carrié 2018), referring to the French case, which reports the results of an investigation, commissioned by the Directorate for Judicial Protection of Youth (PJJ). The two researchers at the Université Paris Nanterre fully analysed the "official records of 133 young people prosecuted for terrorism offences or reported by the services of the Protection Judiciaire de la Jeunesse (PJJ) for 'radicalisation'" (ivi, p. 8). By examining the personal characteristics and the family and social history of these young people, as described in the records compiled by the juvenile circuit staff, the authors shed light on the paths that led them to approach radical ideologies and the micro-processes that resulted in their violent enactment.

The international publications explicitly investigating the point of view of professionals in the field have mainly addressed sectors other than the penal circuit, mainly in the area of educational and social intervention (Haugstvedt and Gunnarsdottir 2023; Mattsson 2018; Vallinkoski and Benjamin 2023; Van de Weert and Eijkman 2019, 2020a, 2020b), or schools (Holmberg 2021; Sjøen and Mattsson 2020), in several, mainly northern European countries (Norway, Sweden, Holland, and Finland). These studies analysed the ways in which professionals perceive the phenomenon of violent radicalism and how it affects their everyday work. An interesting point that emerges from these articles concerns the conflict, experienced by the operators, between the securitarian attitudes disseminated through public and institutional discourses and, consequently, in the formal directives and guidelines to which they are also called upon to respond, on the one hand, and the educational mandate and deontological indications that characterise the daily work of professionals, on the other. This conflict may reach the point at which professionals experience considerable emotional strain (Haugstvedt and Gunnarsdottir 2023). Moreover, it is precisely the adoption of a securitarian register and the segregationist dynamics associated with it that are described as a possible, albeit indirect, cause of the radicalisation process (Mattsson 2018). Finally, some studies highlight how practitioners do not feel adequately trained for the task that is required of them, in relation to the lack of a clear framework to distinguish radicalisation from violent extremism and the tendency to rely on personal perceptions rather than evidence-based criteria to identify people who are potentially at risk (Vallinkoski and Benjamin 2023; Van de Weert and Eijkman 2019, 2020a, 2020b).

On the other hand, the point of view of professionals in the penal circuit has rarely be considered, despite the fact that it appears to be particularly significant, as their professional functions, such as those of prison officers and educational or social workers, are particularly relevant and strategic, acting as an interface between prison institutions (including prison management, as well as the centralised and decentralised prison administration)[1] and their inmates. In fact, considering the Italian case, prison-police personnel are required by Italian law (law No. 395 of 15.12.1990) to "guarantee order" and "safeguard security", as well as to participate in "observation activities and the re-educational treatment of prisoners and internees", which are at the core of the institutional tasks of educational and social personnel. To the best of our knowledge, one article (Meringolo et al. 2019) reports the results of a study conducted in Italy as part of a European project (PROVA 2016–2018) "aimed at counteracting violent radicalization among young offenders" (ibid, p. 166). A part of this research was specifically intended to investigate professionals' perceptions of the radicalisation process. In the brief exposition of the results, some interesting themes emerge, concerning, on the one hand, the "challenges and needs for young offenders" (ibid., p. 167), among which, in particular, the criticalities associated with the adolescent stage and the process of identity construction, as well as through the religious dimension, and,

on the other hand, best practices, activated at different ecological levels (from the micro to the macro), such as network development, the activation of alternative measures to prison, and community-based educational interventions.

3. The Aim of This Article and the Research Framework

The purpose of our article is, therefore, to contribute to filling the gap in international publications by bringing attention to the viewpoint of operators in the juvenile penal circuit on violent radicalism. In particular, by conducting several focus groups with staff working at the Offices of Social Services for Minors (USSM), the Juvenile Penal Institutes (IPM), and the reception communities of two Italian regions (North and South), we aimed to explore their reflections on and descriptions of the following themes:

(1) the concepts of radicality and violent radicalisation in adolescence;
(2) the staff's role in the early detection of signs of radicalisation in the minors under their care, and also in radicalisation prevention and counteraction;
(3) the staff's perception of their knowledge and competence regarding violent radicalism and the professional instruments that they found to be available or lacking in their daily work.

The focus on the Italian case seems to offer an overview of a different landscape from that investigated in other published and previously cited studies, such as those in the French, British, and Scandinavian contexts. Italy, indeed, among the European countries, is characterised by what has been called a "beneficial delay" in the expression of jihadist radicalism (Guolo 2018; Khosrokhavar 2021), which consists of the diffusion and emergence of fundamentalist rhetoric in the discourses of Muslim communities and groups, a more limited presence of radicalised people in its territory, and the substantial absence of overtly violent manifestations and attacks. The Italian public and media discourse, therefore, raises concern about the danger of jihadist radicalisation and its possible violent outcomes, and state institutions (in this case, the Ministry of Justice) are mobilised to formulate guidelines and action plans for prevention and counteraction, in dialogue with other European countries. On the other hand, we would expect the concrete and personal experiences of operators in the field to be limited, precisely because of this "beneficial delay".

3.1. The Juvenile Penal Circuit in Italy

In the Juvenile Sector, that is, within the Department of Juvenile and Community Justice (DGMC), the Juvenile Social Service Offices (USSM) are responsible for taking care of minors from the moment of their entry into the penal circuit, following their charges, throughout the course of the execution of the proceedings against them, until the conclusion of these proceedings (DGMC 2019). The USSM is responsible for drawing up the personality assessment, the basic social enquiry, and, subsequently, the personalised educational project for each minor in their charge. This office oversees both first reception facilities (CPAs), which receive minors until the validation hearing of the proceedings against them, and residential and non-residential facilities. The former includes Youth Justice Residences (both those under ministerial—public management and those run by the private social sector) and Juvenile Detention Centres. In Youth Justice Residences, managed by educational staff and psychologists and characterised by a condition of openness to the outside environment, minors on pre-trial custody and, sometimes, those under alternative measures to prison or probation are placed. In Juvenile Detention Centres (prisons), on the other hand, minors in pre-trial and detention measures are placed, to an increasingly residual extent compared to other forms of custody. These latter facilities are staffed not only by educational personnel but also by prison police. Whenever possible, these structures establish collaborations with other agencies, including private social organisations and voluntary associations, to provide educational, training, cultural, and recreational activities (ibid.). According to data provided by the Italian Ministry of Justice (DGMC 2020)[2], in the period covered by our study, the total number of minors and young adults[3] in the care of the USSM throughout

Italy was 21,350 (see Table 1), the vast majority of whom were male (approximately 89%). The majority were Italian (74%), while there were more young people from countries on the European continent, from both within EU and outside the EU (especially Romania, Albania, and Bosnia-Herzegovina), as well as from Africa and North Africa in particular (Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia). In 2018, however, the number difference between Italians and foreigners reduced: the number of placements in the Youth Justice Residences fell from a ratio of 62% to38%; the presence of foreign minors was almost equally distributed between those of African origin (mainly Maghrebi) and those of European origin (from other EU or non-EU countries). Furthermore, the difference almost disappears when the numbers of inmates present in the Juvenile Detention Centres, as of 21 December 2018, are examined: 237 Italian minors and 203 foreign minors (ibid.). It should be noted, however, that these data do not allow for the number of Italian children with migrant backgrounds who obtain Italian citizenship. Moreover, the published data do not provide a census of the religions with which the minors identify, although this can be estimated, within a certain degree of approximation, from their nationality; the Muslim religion can be identified as the second most heavily represented, after the Christian Catholic religion.

Table 1. Nationalities of minors in the charge of the Ministry of Justice (2018) for which the number is above 100 (other nationalities are included in the last line of the graph), in descending order.

Minors and Young Adults in the Care of USSM in 2018	Country of Origin
15.783	Italy
933	Romania
850	Morocco
553	Albania
375	Gambia
292	Egypt
242	Tunisia
216	Bosnia and Herzegovina
170	Senegal
142	Serbia
131	Nigeria
112	Moldova
1551	Other nationalities/stateless persons
21.350	Total

Finally, the most frequently charged offences are those against property (mainly theft and robbery), drug violations, and offences against persons (mainly voluntary bodily harm).

3.2. Methodological Note

This article presents some results elaborated by the research group of the University of Padua in an action–research activity, carried out as part of the European project H2020 project called "Transfer Radicalisation Approaches in Training—Tra-in Training", aiming at the investigation of the perceptions of juvenile justice operators concerning the relations between adolescence, radicality, and violent radicalisation processes, focusing on the role of, the obstacles against, and the resources available to penitentiary operators and the penal institution in the management of these dynamics.

To this end, eight focus groups were conducted in the period between May and July 2018 in two Italian regions (one in the north and one in the south), chosen in agreement with the Department of Penitentiary Administration, the lead partner in the project. The focus groups, led by two moderators, lasted a total of 16 h and involved a total of 55 participants (from a minimum of four to a maximum of fifteen per session), including penitentiary operators (service executives, social workers, prison police officers, and educators) from two Social Service Offices for Minors (USSM), two Juvenile Detention Centres (IPM), and four Youth Justice Residences (public, i.e., ministerial-run, or private, i.e., run by

the private social sector). The participants signed an informed consent form covering their participation and registration and the use, for research purposes, of the material collected during the focus groups. The focus groups were recorded and subsequently transcribed using a simplified code, to faithfully reproduce the flow of the participants' speech (including hesitations, self-corrections, etc.) and, at the same time, to facilitate the smooth reading of the text. Some annotations on the most significant aspects of non-verbal expression (laughter, sighs, etc.) are reported within double round brackets. Overlaps in the speech of different participants are reported within square brackets. The participants were anonymised and the female gender was used for all.

4. The Institutional Framework: Some Notes on the Italian Penal System Confronted with Cultural and Religious Diversity

Notwithstanding the relatively favourable condition experienced by Italy, and as a partial explanation for this condition, the national political and intelligence bodies have long focused on the phenomenon of jihadist radicalisation, including in the prison environment (Rhazzali 2021; Bernardini et al. 2021). The Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice, and the Italian Department of Penitentiary Administration seem to have increasingly combined an approach to the phenomenon of violent radicalisation within a "securitarian" dimension with a model that couples the preventive dimension with the management of cultural diversity and religious plurality.

4.1. Prevention of Violent Radicalisation in Prison: Between Securitarian and Preventive Approaches

The securitarian approach was developed through the establishment, in 2007, within the Department of Penitentiary Administration, of a Central Investigative Nucleus (NIC), dedicated precisely to investigative activities in the field of organised crime and terrorism[4], operating in coordination with the Committee for Extra-Terrorist Analysis (C.A.S.A.), which is in turn constituted by the Ministry of the Interior in 2004[5].

On the other hand, these institutions have chosen to collaborate in different European and transnational programmes on the prevention of and fight against violent radicalization. Moreover, they have chosen to be at the forefront of two European intervention projects, in which the Department of Prison Administration of the Italian Ministry of Justice worked in partnership with other national and international institutions, including the university of the two authors of this article: "Rasmorad P & P—Raising Awareness and Staff MObility on violent RADicalization in Prison and Probation services" (2017–2019) and "Tra-in Training—Transfer Radicalisation Approaches in Training" (2018–2020). These projects aimed at the development and implementation of new tools for assessing the risk of jihadist radicalisation in prisons and their sharing through the development of facilities and training courses for prison and probation workers. They drew attention to the importance of scientifically based knowledge of the phenomenon and of staff training.

In other circumstances, t Penitentiary Administration has also committed itself to fostering the training of staff on the issues of religious plurality in the prison context, as well as to offering training activities to inmates themselves. As an example of the first case, we can mention a training activity proposed in 2016 by the Regional Superintendency of the Prison Administration of Lombardy, which, together with some Catholic, Jewish, and Islamic religious organisations, and the State University of Milan, organised a workshop on "getting to know religious pluralism in Italian prisons", in which approximately 150 prison police officers participated. For the second case, on the other hand, particularly significant is a training experience conducted in 2015 at the Rocco D'Amato Prison in Bologna, on the initiative of Brother Ignazio De Francesco, through a workshop on the reading of the Italian Constitution set in dialogue with some Constitutions of Arab countries, aimed mainly at Muslim inmates. The workshop path was documented in a publication (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2015) and in a documentary film (Santarelli 2015) that were presented in several national and international film festivals.[6] Although it was not directly related to

the topic of radicalism, the willingness to conduct this educational project within prison walls offers evidence of the prison administration's concern for a deeper reflection on the challenges of cultural and religious plurality in prisons.

A further important step in the consolidation of the preventive and multi-agency approach promoted by Italian institutions is represented by the implementation of the international project, PriMED—Prevention and Interaction in the Trans-Mediterranean Space (2019–2021). Its main objective was to build a network of universities and research centres specialising in the study of the phenomenon of violent radicalisation and in the development of intervention tools in various areas of society affected by this issue (a network of 22 universities: 12 Italian and 10 from OCI countries). The project devoted two lines of intervention to the prison environment, which were translated into a dialogue with the DAP and the co-development of training courses, two of which were aimed at prison-police officers, organised by the State University of Milan and the Bicocca University of Milan[7], and two of which were addressed to imams, murshidat, and religious ministers working in prison environments, carried out by the Research, Study, and Training Centre for Italian Islam of the University of Padua[8].

Finally, the DAP has been engaged in signing memoranda of understanding with two of Italy's largest Islamic organisations for the admission of religious ministers into prisons. The Italian penal system, in fact, ensures that religious assistance in prisons is guaranteed to inmates who request it. However, this right is constrained by the different statuses enjoyed, according to state law, by different religious denominations. While, the figure of the Catholic chaplain has always been present among permanent prison staff, together with prison police and socio-medical and educational staff, the admission of religious ministers or personnel from other faiths depends on whether they reach what are known as "intese" (agreements) with the state[9]. In the case of Islam, which has not entered into such an agreement, access is subject to the granting of personal authorisation signed by the prison warden.

4.2. A Note on the Italian Case: Pluralism "Under Construction"

Some further clarifications on the Italian context are necessary to account for the relevance of these interventions, on the one hand, and their incomplete maturation on the other. Firstly, scarce social mobility prevails in Italy, and the presence of people from migrant backgrounds in state institutions is still very limited, to the point that it is almost absent. This is despite the fact that, after a history mainly characterised by the outflows of Italian citizens to other European countries and to the Americas and Australia, for more than forty years Italy has been considered a destination of arrival or transit in the context of migration. In this regard, it is worth noting that participation in public selection for employment in state institutions (from local administrations to national bodies, from the police force to schools) is conditional on Italian citizenship, whose granting, in turn, currently involves a lengthy process. At the same time, there remains a general lack of awareness of cultural and religious diversity among the national population, which is conditioned by often strongly stereotypical and stigmatising rhetoric and narratives, especially regarding the Muslim world (Pace and Rhazzali 2018). A final note concerns the current conditions of Italian prison facilities, which in several cases are obsolete and, moreover, burdened by very high rates of overcrowding. The latter problem does not apply, however, to facilities for minors (Juvenile Detention Centres and Youth Justice Residences), which suffer from a lack of resources with which to offer adequate educational, cultural, and recreational opportunities to the young people in their charge.

5. The Operators' Point of View: Between Complexity and Reflexivity

To explore operators' views of the violent radicalization of young people in the penal circuit, we asked the participants in the focus groups to describe the particular characteristics of the minors in their care. We therefore solicited a debate by proposing an interpretative framework in which adolescence itself is an age characterised by different

forms of radicality (Maggiolini and Di Lorenzo 2018), including the potential for forms of violent radicalism. This topic opened up discussions on the difficulties and challenges of working with minors, particularly when the complexity associated their developmental phase is intertwined with that of cultural and religious diversity.

5.1. Adolescence: Identity Constructions in the Making

A first important point that emerged from our research was precisely the degree of reflexivity shown by many participants who, when describing the minors they looked after, did not stop at a crystallised reading of their differences, and did not reproduce the stereotypes and stigma that the outside world often attributes to them, but rather presented an articulate reading of the complexity of the minors' backgrounds.

> A: Many of them we know a little bit by now, others a little less, it also depends: first generation, second generation, parents present in the area, what kind of parents, there's the working mother, she's already emancipated, she speaks Italian, there's the lady who stays at home doesn't say a word, so, I mean, it depends a lot at least I see this (Extract 1—Focus Group at Youth Justice Residence).

As shown in excerpt 1, the operators discussed the topic among themselves, identifying some aspects that they considered to be typical manifestations of this cohort of adolescents, with no differences between young Italians and minors from migrant background; others that were more specific and referred to other factors, such as specific national origins, the timing of family or personal migrations, and the extent of the emancipation of the families of origin, in both concrete (economic and social, for example) and cultural terms. Among the elements characterising the minors in care, across all backgrounds, the focus-group participants mentioned the tendency to withdraw from social life in favour of the use of technology, the attraction of objects as status symbols (the latest generation of telephones, expensive shoes), a particular interest in the body and physicality, and the reference to criminal history as a way of establishing leadership in the group. These aspects were associated, on the other hand, with emotional immaturity, with a kind of "alexithymia", a loss of emotional competence, which was expressed in the oscillation between, on the one hand, the "myth of happiness and being efficient always and in any case" and, on the other hand, "terror, frustration, and sadness", which were linked precisely with the use and abuse of illicit substances.

An important facet of the adolescents' construction of their identity comprised cultural and religious aspects. The importance and centrality of these elements were discussed during the focus groups. The general image that was proposed as a characteristic of the adolescent age, in a transversal way, was a sort of substantial disinterest in the religious dimension, to the point that the fact of showing an interest and involvement in religiosity, even with the demonstration of a good knowledge of theology, was seen as a rare event, but one that sometimes occurred. In the words of other operators, however, the religious dimension, and Islam in particular, appeared to be significant in the experiences of some of the minors of North African origin.

> E: Not for everyone, but if it is a reference, it emerges with a certain overbearingness. [M1[10]: M m] Otherwise, it is not the rule in my opinion. That is, there are not many kids who feel the religious element to be particularly important, but if they do feel it, it is represented and they refer, let's say, to the religious precept even in speeches that go beyond (…) now I think of some guys [M2: an example] specifically… now I have two or three also, I mean, of the known ones… for example, when there was to deal with, I think—I go for specific situations that maybe [M1: yes] [M2: very well] I'm more facilitated. With respect to the extremely Westernised behaviour of a sister, the brother in, let's say, talking about this aspect, referred to how in the culture of origin, just fo- and he also said 'for us the-', because I asked a very silly question, I said 'but in your culture' and he said 'for me culture is religion. That is why, in our religion, she should not go out with people other than those indicated by my father, she should not wear a

miniskirt, and she absolutely should not smoke'. That's like referring to the fact that he's... as the older brother he would have had the task of also taking care of the younger sister's address a little bit, and also making some um- religious references in that sense. Which then I can't always grasp [M1: M m] because in short [B: We lack all that knowledge] except those two three things (Extract 2—Focus group at Juvenile Social Service Office).

In the testimony of a Juvenile Social Services worker, the presence of the religious element is in fact reported as unusual (see extract 2: "otherwise it is not the rule in my opinion"; "that is, there are not many kids who feel the religious element particularly important"). When it is present, however, it seems to become almost totalising (see extract 2: "but if it is a reference, it emerges with a certain overbearingness"; "it is represented and they refer, let's say, to the religious precept even in speeches that go beyond"), overlapping and blending with culture(extract 2: "for me culture is religion"). The religious order is thus described in these cases as an ethical and normative reference, regulating family relations and social conduct.

M1: And, and, and yet is there a difference between them and the other children of migrants, of other geographical areas and Italians? ((short pause)) Do I understand correctly?

B: And because it's an element that—here—even if they don't practise it, it's still there on the table. I mean it's st- it's a strong aspect in that culture there and so I mean, I don't know how to say, either because you distance yourself from it, or because you use it instrumentally, or because you say you adhere to it, it's there [M1: It's present]. It's present, yes.

(...)

M1: Mm. Boys from the Balkans? Albania, Kosovo? Macedonia?

E: M!

I: About religion you say? [M1: Yes, yes] About religion?

((short pause))

I: It is less strong.

M1: Less strong?

IG: In my opinion it is less strong. That is, while for the kids, let's say [M1: Starting from your concrete experience?] Yes [M1: Have you had cases?] that is... for the North Africans it is a form of identity, the religion..., that is, very strong. And sometimes it also represents a confidence... in my opinion... (Extract 3—Focus group at Juvenile Social Service Office).

According to other colleagues, Islam was a very strong and present ingredient in the identity construction of minors, particularly of North African origin (see extract 3: 'for the North Africans it is a form of identity, the religion..., that is, very strong'), unlike those with origins in other countries with a strong Muslim presence, where "it is not evident" and "leaks out", almost subtly, in speeches. For children from North African backgrounds, according to these operators, the religious element is, therefore, always present, as a kind of reference point (see extract 3: "it's still there on the table"), regardless of whether they recognise it or distance themselves from it, and of whether they adhere to it with enthusiasm or use it instrumentally.

N: My point of view, that if it weren't for the fact that there is this pork at the table that differentiates them, in reality, the religious connotation between Catholic Muslim rather than other in their daily lives is never characterised. It is never apparent. If not a perception of feeling Muslim, then somewhat under attack. In the sense of not having the privilege of being Catholic. That is, you experience the otherness of not conforming to the dominant thought. That is to say, that it is more belonging than religious feeling per se.

(...)

N: So even for Italian boys, let's say, of Catholic religion, it's a bit of a sense that you have with respect to certain things. That is, the role of women, which, however, is fami- that is, you don't tie it to religion, you tie it to the experience that you, that is, at home, your father, your family somehow relegated the role of women there, for you it's there. And then homosexuality. [A: but like our southern Italians] [G: Like... like Italians] Exactly. That is, whether you're from Reggio Calabria [G: It's cultural, because that is], from Reggio Emilia, or [G: Familiar] from Tunis, woman and homosexuality are the two elements on which, let's say, [A: Pour out] you pour out your ((short pause)) that is, but it's not religio- it's really cultural (Extract 4—Focus group at Youth Justice Residence).

Other operators, on the other hand, shrewdly questioned this reading, somewhat echoing the previously quoted statement from a minor (extract 2: "for me, culture is religion') as if recalling the need, instead, to distinguish between the two levels of culture and religion (see extract 4: 'that is, but it's not religio- it's really cultural'), as well as the different levels of interpretation: on the one hand, the youth experiences and perceptions (extract 4: "if not a perception of feeling Muslim"), and, on the other hand, the analytical categories used to analyse their meanings (extract 4: "it is more belonging than religious feeling per se"), their manifestations, in their everyday lives (extract 4: "if it weren't for the fact that there is this pork at the table that differentiates them, in reality, the religious connotation between Catholic Muslim rather than other in their daily lives is never characterised"), and in the expression of their positions (extract 4: "it's a bit of a sense that you have with respect to certain things. That is, the role of women"). In these extracts the operators recognise another important element that concerns the negative experience that this element of identity can involve, the perception of otherness as a lack of "privilege", and even as a source of "attack" (see extract 4: "a perception of feeling Muslim, then somewhat under attack. In the sense of not having the privilege of being Catholic. In the sense of not having the privilege of being Catholic. That is, you experience the otherness of not conforming to the dominant thought").

Another relevant aspect that, in the testimonies of the operators, seems to be common to the minors is a sense of disengagement, which manifests itself, first of all, in the fact that they feel little involved in the decisions that affect their lives; they lack passions and withdraw into their own private dimensions, with a tendency towards individualism and selfishness. In the discussion, a USSM worker argued that this characteristic of apathy was more attributable to Italian minors, whereas the children with a migration background had a different, more active approach to existence, which she refers to as the need to "roll up one's sleeves to survive", alluding to the difficulties in the migration journey.

A: Then, perhaps, from the point of view, instead, of psychological refinement or precisely of life planning, they are more backward, often. But this is also linked to the difficulty of an educational process that can facilitate the, perhaps, forward-looking. So the Italian who, in short, has done his schooling, is still doing his schooling, and who has a minimum project may have already envisaged it, on the other hand, a kid who, we are still there, if he is not of the second generation so that he too has taken the same path, finds it more difficult to go further, that is to say, it is often we who build, within, that is to say, the occasion almost becomes the commission of the crime. The one for which to take stock, and to build a minimum of professionalising orientation, through projects that V. in particular is always looking to provide us with, because this is really the turning point, isn't it? In the sense that this is where we can convert him, not from a religious point of view, but with respect to a social coexistence more similar to the one we have in mind. (Extract 5—Focus Group at Youth Justice Residence).

The committing of the offence, in the words of an operator of a Youth Justice Residence (see extract 5), on the other hand, almost becomes an opportunity for the minors to experi-

ence a turning point, especially those with a migration background, in order for them to be able to work on the construction of a life and work project that they had not previously realised outside the residential system, due to lack of opportunities. Furthermore, in the words of another colleague, the offer of new possibilities of an educational or recreational nature (e.g., a training course for a cook's assistant or voluntary work at an association of 118[11]), which can take place in the course of taking charge, opens up new scenarios in which these minors can move "from letting themselves live to activation".

This feeling of disengagement can also manifest itself in a sense of remoteness and distrust, if not accusation, towards society and institutions in general, as shown from the following discussion:

> M2: And what image do they have of society? ((chuckles)) and if they have such an image... where society means everything, it means the external social network, relations with the territory [A: Of distrust, often].
>
> T: There, you've taken the words out of my mouth.
>
> G: Pure distrust.
>
> T: Yes, mostly [A: But this may be less the foreigners].
>
> A: A little bit. But mistrust.
>
> (...)
>
> T: But then it's often us as a penal institution, which is probably the last thing they encounter after the school, the local social service, and then they come to us, you know, we kind of sew up a thread, I imagine myself a bit like Penelope, you know, in the sense that sometimes I sew up frayed threads made of lack of trust, mistrust, made of failures, which it's easier for the kids to blame on a service than on themselves or the gang they belong to.
>
> (...)
>
> A: There is a criticism, in my opinion, at three hundred and sixty degrees. I mean [N: Exactly].
>
> M2: It doesn't concern me.
>
> A: Not only does it not concern me, it [L: It's against me], yes, it is against me.
>
> N: Like the police is, like the school is, like the social worker is.
>
> (Extract 6—Focus Group at Youth Justice Residence).

5.2. Adolescence: Between Radicalities and Radicalisation

At the same time, according to the operators, these minors live under the spell of their peer groups, whereby the gaze and judgement of others become extremely conditioning, almost to the extent of becoming a form of violence.

> V: In fact, while you were talking, I wasn't thinking of radicalisation in spiritual, religious terms, but I was thinking of the group, wasn't I? ((pause)) and it came to my mind: if you don't dress in a certain way... [M: Exactly] you don't belong you can't belong to that group so for me it becomes violent at the moment... in which and you consider yourself the holder of the truth or uniqueness and everything else is not right it's not good it doesn't work... and therefore there is an exclusion, there is no confrontation, there is no reasoning even critical but it becomes expulsive (...) as you also said before, it makes me think of the kids that if you don't have that kind of dress you're not... you're out, so there's judgement, there's exclusion, but really disqualification as a person... you don't understand anything because you're not, you don't fit into that particular context... it's like that [B: But even if you don't share the ways of life] if you don't share everything right? (Extract 7—Focus Group at Juvenile Social Services Office).

In the words of worker V, one of the forms in which the radical nature of adolescence can be manifested is, in fact, the absolute dependence on the peer group, which is played

out in the dynamics of inclusion (being part of the group) and of exclusion, which results almost in the "disqualification as a person" and can lead to acts of bullying or cyberbullying (as witnessed by some colleagues), when the "sense of limit", of the consequences of one's actions, is lost. The group seems to act by expelling everything that is not similar to itself, which is not aligned with certain rigid and established codes, such as those of clothing (not having "that brand on"), and of particular behaviours or lifestyles, such as the use of drugs. In this sense, the group acts as the unique holder of truth and does not allow communication with other voices that might open a confrontation or question its assumptions.

Reflecting on the motives which could ultimately lead to actual forms of violent radicalisation, the participants referred to two different orders of factors, which could be described as expulsive or attractive.

> F: Of course and then for adolescents opposition to adults is physiological anyway so ((pause)).

> H: The opposition to adults, the opposition to the rules and at the same time the fascination of ideality, of utopia, which can be realised [N: The cause]... the cause, yes, to sacrifice oneself for a cause ((pause)) what's better when you don't have a defined future... especially for immigrants then this is perhaps even more ((pause)) even more profound.

> M1: Yes then we had the str... so strong that there are also converts who convert for that very reason.

> H: Even Italians [M1: Yes, yes indeed] who converted for this very reason ((pause)) because they didn't have an ideality ((pause)) close by.

> (...)

> N: In my opinion, this is the motivation here, to exclude all those who are Westerners ((pause)) otherwise I wouldn't explain this motive of theirs to enclose themselves ((pause)) to create a barricade (Extract 8—Focus Group at Juvenile Detention Centre).

Among the expulsive factors, the participants identified the transition from a physiological adolescent tendency, that of rebellion, the rejection of the adult world and rules (see extract 8: "for adolescents opposition to adults is physiological anyway" and "the opposition to adults, the opposition to the rules"), which leads to an extreme form of closure towards what is defined as "Western" (see extract 8: "to exclude all those who are Westerners"; extract 9: "it's the usual Western world that treats us in this way" and "they feel they are something else compared to what is Western culture").

> N: At that age it's never their fault ((pause)) it's always someone else's fault and probably [U: they have their idols, they imitate someone] they find ((pause)) they came to prison maybe they didn't... I mean... they didn't want to be here and so on ((pause)) they blame someone, it's the usual Western world that treats us in this way and so on ((pause)) and they feed a state of ((pause)) malaise that sometimes could lead to this (...) for those who come from Africa you can imagine ((pause)) it's clear that they are ghettoised they ghettoise themselves because they feel they are something else compared to what is Western culture and so on then... you put a little bit of drugs you put a little bit of ((pause)) it creates a mix that can lead to Islamic proselytism and also to acts of that kind ((pause)) and the prison takes the offer with respect to these things here ((pause)) for all the news items ((pause)) they are in prison ((pause)) why? Because here they complain when they get out they explode... even Italians complain about being in prison against the institutions can you imagine a foreigner who ((pause)) who lives it also maybe as an unfair thing (Extract 9—Focus Group at Juvenile Detention Centre).

Opposition and closure, as in the cases reported by N, are also associated with experiences of marginalisation in society and persecutory experiences associated with the entry

into the penal circuit, which is felt as unfair and frustrating (see extract 9: "they didn't want to be here and so on ((pause)) they blame someone", " it's the usual Western world that treats us in this way", and " who lives it also maybe as an unfair thing"). These perceptions were therefore suggested by the participants as possible risk factors for moving from the experience of frustration to more disruptive forms of enactment (see extract 9: "because here they complain when they get out they explode "). The attractive factors, on the other hand, refer to idealistic striving, which is also typical of adolescents, but which can result in adherence to extreme ideologies (see extract 8: "the fascination of ideality, of utopia, which can be realised [N: the cause]... the cause, yes, to sacrifice oneself for a cause"), and to the transition to violence when associated with expulsive factors and, in particular, with the feeling of being deprived of alternatives, of future perspectives (see extract 8: "what's better when you don't have a defined future").

A further interesting point that emerged, seems to have been, once again, the consideration of how entering the juvenile penal circuit, which generally constitutes a further risk for the exacerbation of persecutory experiences, can, in some cases, also result in an experience that encourages the development of positive traits and the emergence of opportunities for change. In particular, some operators of the Youth Justice Residences suggested that such community environments are, on the one hand, more challenging for the minors, but on the other hand, "more democratic" and "open" than prison. Due to these characteristics, the community environments help to mitigate potential tendencies towards radicalisation through the experience of living, as well as in the concrete sense of sharing a room, with young people of different cultural or religious backgrounds.

Regarding this highly complex framework, which characterises the adolescent stage as it intertwines with the biographies of minors in care, the interviewed operators affirmed the difficulty of identifying and recognising possible signs of violent radicalisation. In order to stimulate discussion, during the focus group, the moderators proposed a fictitious case (see extract 10), which involved a scenario of the possible onset of radicalisation in a juvenile justice context (Juvenile Detention Centre, Youth Justice Residence), inviting the participants to discuss their interpretations and the implications of these.

> M1: Let's imagine that someone who is here ((pause)) at first doesn't, and at a certain point starts praying and asking to read the Koran, he grows a beard, yes, maybe he tries to talk to others about religion, maybe he has committed crimes like everyone else, because otherwise he wouldn't be ((laughs)) here, right? And how do you think the others would react? I mean like the other guys but also ((pause)) how would the context react I mean you the operators, etc., and what should be done? (Extract 10—Focus Group at Juvenile Detention Centre).

The operators specifically portrayed the adolescent stage as the developmental phase of the potential and the possible, rather than of the realised and the definite, and a characterised by indefiniteness and tentativeness (see extract 11: "they're really evolving", "they can also be attitudes that then pass with time", "they are such evolving personalities", and "they are very much in development").

> I: Our kids are also very young in the sense that we don't know what they'll be doing in three years' time, I mean! No, they could become, I don't know, university researchers or they could become de- I mean, they're really evolving, so... catching s-symptoms for prevention, in short, I mean, it's risky because they can also be attitudes that then pass with time [M1: Sure] like maybe they smoke (eighty) joints, maybe in three years they could become drug addicts, yes, but they could also stop, I don't know, I mean [M1: Yes, yes, no] but here it is, from my point of view, they are such evolving personalities that I mmm, if I were to think about my case history... identify some... I don't know some risk indicators, [M1: m m] um for me it would be... yes, precisely, risky, not only difficult but risky [M1: Sure]. (...) Because teenagers are always very at risk about so many things, aren't they? [M1: Sure] I mean, they're always, like, exaggerated. So and then here, as H. said... I think it's a phenomenon that comes

even later, when one says I choose this, right? [M1: Sure] I mean, they're always, like, exaggerated. So and then here, as H. ....io said, I think it's a phenomenon that comes even later, when one says I choose this, right? Based on the stu... of my identity, as it were formulated, I decide that ((short pause)). Because even the boy I met indirectly,... it happened when he was nineteen. They are still few, however... we have followed kids as young as fifteen-sixteen... that is, they are very [M1: Of course] in development (Extract 11—Focus Group at Juvenile Social Service Office).

On the one hand, as mentioned above, this feature makes it difficult to detect signs of radicalisation, while, on the other hand, in the words of another Juvenile Detention Centre operator, it constitutes a risk factor, since it makes the minors "unstructured or unmanageable" and, therefore, "more easily influenced". Another aspect used to characterise the adolescent stage was exaggeration, the exploration of extremes, which, in themselves, are associated with risk in general (see extract 11: "because teenagers are always very at risk about so many things" and "I mean, they're always, like, exaggerated").

5.3. Active Prevention in the Penal Sector: Between Challenges, Conflicts, and Resources

When considering adolescence, therefore, the operators emphasised not only the difficulty in identifying possible signs of radicalisation among the different forms of excess that characterise this age, but also the risk they ran in carrying out this task (see extract 11, "for me it would be... yes, precisely, risky, not only difficult but risky"), of leading to processes of stigmatisation and to breaking the pact of trust with the minors in care, which is the cornerstone of the operators' work. The operators' cautiousness in identifying and reporting suspected cases of violent radicalisation in their services also reflects an awareness, explicitly expressed during the focus groups, of the risk they run of being influenced by the prejudices and media pressures to which they are all exposed, and the desire to be free of them in their daily work.

> N: this... This reflection that you solicited a little bit prompts in me another reflection instead ((pause)) how much... we ask to be careful a little bit of the prejudice, right? Because it came to me as to immediately think what would arouse in me the choice of an Italian guy ((pause)) mmm, that I care to in my ordinary work, if he should come to me and say: "I'm entering the seminary"... right? I mean... in the sense that, well, ((pause)) this is also a choice, right? How should I say, a radical choice [M1: Of course!]... and what would this choice arouse in me, right? this choice, the same right? fear ((pause)) ... where are we going, right? Your... such a radical choice will modify your life, it will modify it in the future, as well as the choice of this guy, right? to follow in a so to say .... strong and definitive way, right? the dictates of his religion... I wonder how we have to... is it perhaps that we have to learn to manage well also, how to say, the prejudice... and perhaps to go through the knowledge, that is to say the true knowledge of what is, right? Can lead to in a religious culture different from ours ((pause)) Well, I think we have to be very prepared to avoid falling into prejudice because ((pause)) Well, right... because we are bombarded by so much information that is often always in negative terms [LP: Of course], but we don't talk about what is positive because, I mean, right? (Extract 12—Focus Group at Juvenile Social Service Office).

In particular, in this extract, operator N offers a comparison with a situation that could also involve an Italian minor, the choice to dedicate one's life to religion by entering a seminary, and asks herself, with a rhetorical question, if this decision would have the same alarming effect on them (see excerpt 12, "what would arouse in me the choice of an Italian guy ((pause)) mmm, that I care to in my ordinary work, if he should come to me and say: "I'm entering the seminary"") if it were taken by a teenager from the Catholic faith instead of a Muslim teenager, since it also entails a "radical" life change (extract 12: "this is also a choice, right? How should I say, a radical choice").

The operator's actions, in this framework, are described as somehow balancing the need to keep the sense of trust with the minors in the foreground and to operate according to their educational and social mandate (see extract13: "let's say that our role has been to stick to the social service role anyway"): the need to perform a controlling role and to report any suspicions or risky situations balanced with the desire not to avoid trespassing through functions that do not pertain to them and for which they do not feel they have the necessary competence; in other words, quasi-investigative functions (see extract 13: "we must be very careful not to overdo the investigative part. Because I believe that it is not our role, and that we also run the risk of doing damage").

> E: Let's say that our role has been to stick to the social service role anyway. Because then it's a moment you take on the role of detective, which doesn't pertain to us. So... That is, when the first request came from Rome, I had made a series of complaints because I said: this is not my job. That is, my job is to evaluate and make planning if there is room for it, and to evaluate and support if there is no room for an outward project. Um, so, let's say, even in my opinion we as a social service must... in the absolute consciousness of our role, find some mediation margins. We must be very careful not to overdo the investigative part. Because I believe that it is not our role, and that we also run the risk of doing damage (Extract 13—Focus Group at Juvenile Social Service Office).

Asked by the focus-group moderators about their perceived competence in coping with potential cases involving the risk of violent radicalisation, the participants gave different answers. Some referred to a sense of being unprepared and lacking resources (see extract 14: "we are absolutely barefoot... barefoot and limbless").

> M2: And so in this hypothetical case one could argue that... you would not be ready, would you be ready, are you prepared?
>
> H: We are absolutely barefoot... barefoot and limbless.
>
> F: We believe that our instruments are the psychologist, the psychiatrist, so in the case of a guy who.... precisely presents this... we turn to other figures who are the ones we have more or less at our disposal, but actually we lack.
>
> I: We turn to the mediator...
>
> (...)
>
> M2: So the mediation instrument is an instrument that can be activated in a situation that is the one M1 presented to you, the hypothetical one? [H: yes] That is, you have the suspicion [H: yes] so you want to mobilise to understand better then you activate the mediation service... what other kind of actions... can you activate?
>
> H: None!
>
> M2: No, to understand better if it is a case of.... worrying of radicalisation or....
>
> H: personal tools that each of us... activates.
>
> I: Careful observation... careful observation of change. It comes to me to say, right?
>
> (Extract 14—Focus Group at Juvenile Detention Centre).

Other operators mentioned, instead, a series of basic skills that were part of their professional background and that, as operators, they were able to activate, in a coherent way, within their ordinary practice and in line with the objectives of their work with the minors (see extract 14: "careful observation ... careful observation of change") or that they could acquire, through training, and apply in their practice (see excerpt 15: " the reading tools, in my opinion, are what we should equip ourselves with" and " we have the big role of... offering some slices of sociality to which we can hook the youngsters").

> E: The reading tools, in my opinion, are what we should equip ourselves with, in this as in all other situations. And then deal with ehmmm, how should I say it,

I think these are synergic interventions, where the social service can be a good detector and, in a work done together with others, [M1: Of course] insert some pieces because we, in my opinion, we have the big role of… offering some slices of sociality to which we can hook the youngsters. So, in my opinion, that's what we can off- that we usually offer and that we can also offer in these situations.

M2: In what sense?

E: That is, trying to make proposals to them. Proposals of sociality, of places, of spaces [M2: Different] yes, yes. Because usually radicalisation seems almost a kind of withdrawal into oneself, doesn't it? This isolation… that leads one to find va-, as my colleague rightly said, values… somewhere else (Extract 15—Focus group at Juvenile Social Service Office).

Finally, the participants emphasised the need to work with a coordinated and synergic approach with other actors in the field (see extract 15: "in a work done together with others"), who are part of the local services (such as the neuropsychiatric service) and are used to working in penitentiary environments, namely judges, first and foremost, as well as psychologists, psychiatrists, or sociologists (see extract 14: "we believe that our instruments are the psychologist, the psychiatrist" and "we turn to other figures who are the ones we have more or less at our disposal"), as well as with some external agents, such as cultural mediators (see extract 14: "we turn to the mediator") and religious actors. This need, however, does not seem to be systematically met in daily practice, due to what the operators reported as a lack of investment in this area.

E: I mean, maybe it is important, on the basis of existing, to make a network. In the sense that I am now thinking of the experience of our region where there are the… Foreign Citizens' Centres, some managed by cooperatives also with long experience… where, they have entered into a more systematic approach with the Local Authority [M1: Of course] with respect to the management of some practices, but not with us of the penal [M1: Of course]. Because then we, in the penal, once the projects are over, we are a ministry that does not invest funds [M1: Yes, of course], so we can only invest in practices. Basically [M1: Yes, of course]. Zero-cost practices. [M1: That's it, that's it] (…) [M2: But isn't there direct contact with the associative world, or with cooperatives that work in this field?] If I call, um, for personal knowledge, for the… work done in the past… the Foreigners' Service Centre of XX, they give me advice, but it's not part of a routine with the Ministry. I don't know how to say. [M1: Sure, sure] [M2: Yes] That is, we should make it accessible, um, even when I am not there, there is another colleague, so to speak [M1: Sure, sure] [M2: Yes] so may- [M1: Protocols] The famous protocols, agreements, good practices (Extract 16—Focus group at Juvenile Social Service Office).

An operational principle of the prison administration, namely, the collaboration between those inside and those outside, and with the territory, its educational agencies, and its social tissue, is in fact depicted here as being dependent on the will and resources of each individual operator (see extract 16: "if I call, um, for personal knowledge, for the… work done in the past") rather than as bound to systematic planning and a structural investment (extract 16: "because then we, in the penal, once the projects are over, we are a ministry that does not invest funds" and "zero-cost practices").

In conclusion, the educational function that the operators claim to be able to perform, in line with their educational mandate, in order to implement preventative actions against the risk of radicalisation (as against other risks of deviance), consists in the offer of proposals of sociability, in terms of places, activities, and opportunities for encounter, in order to counter the tendency towards isolation and expulsion in relation to what the minors experience as other than themselves (see extract 15: "proposals of sociality, of places, of spaces" and "because usually radicalisation seems almost a kind of withdrawal into oneself, doesn't it?").

A: As a specific objective, we don't have that in mind in the work we do, that is to say, alone, right? I think it's more part of the general way we work, which is to valorise as much as possible the personal resources that a kid has and that all kids have, right? And that often they don't know they have, so we try to encourage them in this, support them in this, and it's clear that the more you valorise a person the more frustration is lowered.

T: That is, it is the individualisation of educational activity that in itself should in some way be a deterrent to radicalisation processes. Because the educator's activity, in short, the educative activity is to bring out the best in each of us [G: different opportunities, way of envisaging a project,], opportunities, the things we like, so this is already, in my opinion, a possible antidote (Extract 17—Focus Group at Youth Justice Residence).

On the other hand, the role of the penal environment should also be to offer feasible alternatives for the reconstruction of the minors' life projects and pathways (see extract 17: " different opportunities, way of envisaging a project"), to enhance the personal resources of which, often, the minors themselves are not aware, and to activate potential resources (see extract 17: "to valorise as much as possible the personal resources that a kid has and that all kids have, right? And that often they don't know they have"). This proposal, which also contrasts with the tendency towards apathy and indifference described by some of the operators, is interpreted as a sort of "antidote" to the minors' frustration and, consequently, as a "deterrent to radicalisation processes".

6. Conclusions

The article presented a study, conducted as part of a larger European programme, aimed at investigating the viewpoint of the operators of a juvenile penal circuit on violent radicalism. We held focus groups with the staff working at the Offices of Social Services for Minors (USSM), the Juvenile Penal Institutes (IPM), and the reception communities of two Italian regions (North and South). In particular, we aimed to explore the operators' reflections and opinions of the following themes:

(1) the concepts of radicality and violent radicalisation in adolescence;
(2) the operators' role in the early detection of signs of radicalisation in the minors under their care, as well as in the prevention and counteraction of radicalisation;
(3) the operators' perceptions of their knowledge and competence regarding violent radicalism and the professional instruments that they found to be available or lacking in their daily work.

This research allowed us to compare the experiences of the interviewed operators with those described in other articles, which we discussed above. The dialogue with the body of European scientific research appears to be particularly interesting, since Italy has been described, compared to other international contexts, as characterised by a "beneficial delay" (Guolo 2018; Khosrokhavar 2021) and is, therefore, potentially less affected by securitarian and aggressive approaches to the risk of violent jihadist radicalisation. International publications (see, among the others, Haugstvedt and Gunnarsdottir 2023; Mattsson 2018; Vallinkoski and Benjamin 2023; Van de Weert and Eijkman 2019, 2020a, 2020b) describe the conflict experienced by operators in the educational and social sectors, in some northern European countries, who are called upon to integrate into their daily activities the early detection of violent radicalisation processes in the young people they follow. This topic is of particular interest in our case, because we refer to the field of action of the juvenile penal circuit, in which, unlike other educational and social fields of intervention, the tasks of control and surveillance are normally integrated with educational and rehabilitative tasks, and this duality constitutes a prerogative of the specific intervention area. The complex professional activities of juvenile-prison staff, particularly educational staff, are therefore subject to continuous scrutiny and based on a subtle balance between respecting the institutional educational and control mandate and taking care not to break the pact of

trust established with the minors in the staff's charge. On the one hand, the task of control is managed on a day-to-day basis as an integral part of the educational and rehabilitative process; therefore, it is applied to the entire inmate population, regardless of the risk of radicalisation; contact with judges is a fundamental tool of cooperation, ensuring the minors' successful navigation of their path through the penal circuit. On the other hand, some of the operators highlighted the importance of "defending" themselves from the attribution of tasks that they perceived as excessive and distorting of their function, i.e., tasks aimed more at "investigative" activities (e.g., controlling access to the Internet).

The research presented in this article creates an image of a team of managers and operators who display a certain level of awareness and reflexivity regarding the significance of their role and their professional actions in relation to the peculiarities that characterise the minors in their care, which are expressed on different levels. In the words of the operators, the complex relationship between adolescence and radicalisation includes elements resembling the "physiological" nature of this developmental phase and the characteristics of radicalisation, such as the propensity to seek the most extreme positions and to reject society and the adult world, as well as the tendency towards social withdrawal and towards withdrawal into oneself, in addition to, in the case of young people with a migration background in particular, the experience of exclusion and rejection, which is experienced as persecutory. With specific reference to this persecutory experience among minors, moreover, the operators emphasized the awareness of the risks they run, of being conditioned by stereotypes and fears and of contributing, in this way, to the process of labelling and stigmatising minors, which almost encourages the process of radicalisation the operators intend to prevent (De Backer et al. 2019; Macaluso 2016). Finally, with respect to the perceived level of personal competence in tackling the task of detecting and addressing the manifestation of possible signs of violent radicalisation, the interviewed professionals described themselves as well equipped with their ordinary operational tools, mainly related to the instrument of "careful observation of change". On the other hand, they stated that they felt the need to receive more specific training to help them develop a complex plan, such as that described above, in which the critical issues related to adolescence and the persecutory experience, including the minors' cultural and religious backgrounds, make it particularly difficult to distinguish the actual risk of violent radicalisation from the normal attitudes and behaviours of this age group, and of the population in the charge of the penitentiary system in particular. Therefore, this study made it possible to offer some hypothetical contents and training methods aimed specifically at the professionals covered by this research project.

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Notes

[1]   In the case of Italy, the central dimension is represented by the Dipartimento dell'Amministrazione Penitenziaria (https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_12_3.wp#; accessed on 15 January 2023), established within the Ministry of Justice, to which the different Regional Superintendencies (https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_12_3.wp#; accessed on 15 January 2023) report.

[2]   Department of Juvenile and Community Justice. Office I of the Head of Department—Statistics Section (2020). Minors and young adults in the care of juvenile services—Statistical data analysis—31 December 2018 (https://www.giustizia.it/cmsresources/cms/documents/quindicinale_31.12.2018_c.pdf; accessed on 2 February 2023).

[3]   Young adults, up to the age of 25, who entered the penal circuit when they were still minors, are also in the juvenile justice system.

[4]   Central Investigation Unit, Department of Penitentiary Administration, https://poliziapenitenziaria.gov.it/polizia-penitenziaria-site/it/galleria.page?contentId=CNI16416 (accessed on 5 February 2023).

[5]   Counter-Terrorism Strategic Analysis Committee—https://www1.interno.gov.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/assets/files/14/0765_casa.pdf (accessed on 5 February 2023).

[6]   Dustur, Film directed by Marco Santarelli, 2015—https://filmitalia.org/en/film/215/94910/ (accessed on 9 February 2023).

[7]   The course held in 2020: https://primed-miur.it/operatori-della-pubblica-sicurezza-e-agenti-di-polizia-penitenziaria/ (accessed on 9 February 2023). The course held in 2021: https://primed-miur.it/alta-formazione-per-il-personale-del-provveditorato-regionale-dellamministrazione-penitenziaria/ (accessed on 9 February 2023).

[8]   The course held in 2020: https://primed-miur.it/corso-imam-contesto-penitenziario/ (accessed on 9 February 2023). The course held in 2021: https://primed-miur.it/corso-per-imam-e-ministri-di-culto-musulmani-operanti-nel-contesto-penitenziario-seconda-edizione/ (accessed on 12 February 2023).

[9]   They are made pursuant to Article 8 of the Italian Constitution and are approved by the Parliament by legislative enactment.

[10]   M1 and M2 indicate the two focus group moderators.

[11]   118 is the national emergency number for medical assistance.

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