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EXPLORING PERSONAL JOURNEYS OF RADICALIZATION AND DERADICALIZATION IN DAVAO DE ORO PROVINCE, PHILIPPINES

Jess Elton C. Largado
Student, College of Development Management,
University of Southeastern Philippines, Philippines

ABSTRACT

This study examines the personal journeys of radicalization and deradicalization in Davao de Oro Province. It aims to describe the socio-demographic profile of the research participants and to identify the challenges they face related to radicalization, as well as their experiences in deradicalization and reintegration. The author contends that poverty, deprivations, and early exposure to extreme ideologies led to radicalization. Meanwhile, support, skills, and community involvement enable reintegration. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study gathered data through semi-structured in-depth interviews with five purposively selected participants who are former rebels referred to the Kalayaan Center in Davao de Oro, having surrendered to the law between 2018 and 2025. Themes derived from the process coding revealed that the participants joined extremist groups because of difficult living conditions and ideological appeal. They became disillusioned due to experienced inequality and family struggles. Eventually, they disengaged as they looked for safety, dignity, and purpose through reintegration, work, and community life. Based on the thematic analysis, several key experiences or prevailing themes emerged: Structural and Social Conditions, Ideological Conditioning, Structural Disillusionment and Internal Contradictions, Personal and Family-Centered Turning Points, and Pathways to Reintegration and Reorientation. These themes were derived from their prominence, as reflected in the frequency with which they were mentioned or implicitly expressed by the research participants. The results of this research are expected to aid in the development of a more responsive reintegration program and policy framework in Davao de Oro province.

Keywords:
Former Rebels, Radicalization, Deradicalization, Reintegration Challenges, Qualitative Research, Social Science, Peace and Development Programs

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the disadvantaged positions of the participants who experienced radicalization as a pathway to their engagement in violent extremism, as well as their realizations in deradicalization and challenges with reintegration following their surrender to the folds of the law. Consequently, this study examines the local contexts of radicalization and deradicalization, with a particular focus on former members of the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA) who have operated in the province of Davao de Oro in recent years. I argue that the participants are not enemies but victims of structural injustices, economic hardship, and social exclusion that fostered vulnerability and powerlessness, which led them to engage in extremist ideologies and armed groups; thus, their surrender needs support through thorough and context-sensitive interventions to prevent re-radicalization.

Radicalization is a process by which individuals develop extremist ideologies and beliefs to achieve change and reach political or religious goals (Doosje et al., 2016). The involvement in violent extremism or terrorism develops through a progressive shift from belief formation to action, shaped by various pathways of radicalization (Borum, 2011). Radicalization and recruitment can occur at the individual, group, or mass level, often rooted in specific grievances (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). These processes operate across psychological, social, political, and economic structures that facilitate both ideological alignment and behavioral engagement. Vergani et al. (2020) pointed out two types of radicalization which are behavioral radicalization, or engaging in violent acts, and cognitive radicalization, which refers to adopting extremist beliefs and ideologies. This progression is reflected in the pyramid models of radicalization proposed by McCauley & Moskalenko (2017); the opinion pyramid, which illustrates how people start from being neutral, then support a cause, justify

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violence, and finally feel morally obligated to use violence, and the action pyramid shows how people move from doing nothing to joining legal activities, then engaging in illegal acts, and finally, committing violence against civilians.

Radicalization is shaped by both push factors, or conditions that increase vulnerability to violent extremism, such as poverty, social exclusion, political marginalization, and unresolved grievances; and pull factors, or what directly draw individuals into violent extremism, including financial rewards, personal or social benefits, strong social and family networks, and recruitment by religious or ideological leaders (Loesch, 2017). Marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as farmers, indigenous peoples, youth, and women, are often recruited into extremist movements by exploiting their grievances using promises of land reform, community protection, education, and support, whether material or financial, which serve as key drivers of radicalization (The International Crisis Group 2024). This vulnerability is reinforced by what Chambers (2014) describes as the deprivation trap, a self-reinforcing condition in which disadvantaged individuals face related shortcomings that prevent them from meeting their basic needs for well-being. In such contexts, conflict arises from the ongoing failure to meet basic human needs, as people and groups feel compelled to struggle and, when necessary, resort to violence to ensure that these essential needs are met (Burton, 1990). Similarly, persistent economic hardship, such as widespread poverty, creates a climate of discontent that can push individuals to view violent movements as potential avenues for social or political change (Holden, 2013).

Deradicalization, on the other hand, involves a change in thinking away from extremist beliefs, while disengagement means stepping back from violent actions and terrorist groups, which can happen even if a person does not fully change their beliefs (Horgan, 2009). Disengagement often stems from disappointment with leadership or ideas, fatigue from ongoing violence, concerns about personal and family safety, financial instability, and the desire for a dignified and normal life (Barrelle, 2015; Horgan, 2009). However, the reintegration of disengaged individuals is still difficult because of social stigma, few job opportunities, psychological trauma, and low community acceptance, which increase the chance of returning to extremism (UNODC, 2017). Therefore, sustainable reintegration should be in the sense of rebuilding agency, dignity, and well-being, and reducing the structural conditions that make re-engagement of disengaged individuals in violent extremism. It requires expanding individuals' substantive freedoms such as access to education, health, meaningful work, social affiliation, and political participation (Nussbaum, 2011).

The facts presented above suggest that individual engagement with violent extremism stems from multidimensional issues that can be reduced or prevented by tackling its root causes and offering adequate support for reintegration. In this regard, I would like to explore the personal journeys of radicalization and deradicalization in the province of Davao de Oro, addressing the lack of local evidence on radicalization, involvement in violent extremism, and deradicalization, to inform and improve the provincial government's reintegration programs.

OBJECTIVES

This study aims to explore personal journeys of radicalization and deradicalization in Davao de Oro Province, and further aims to inform the provincial government of Davao de Oro, providing a basis for the development of a more sustainable deradicalization and reintegration program. Specifically, this intends: 1. To describe the socio-demographic profile of the research participants in terms of a.) Age b.) Gender c.) Educational Attainment d.) Occupation, and e.) Years in the extremist/ terrorist group. 2. To identify the lived experiences of the participants in radicalization and deradicalization.

METHODOLOGY

This exploration of personal journeys of radicalization and deradicalization in Davao de Oro Province was studied using a qualitative research design, focusing on a phenomenological approach. Aspers & Corte (2019) define qualitative research as a systematic process in which researchers refine their understanding by getting closer to the real experiences of people or situations, thereby discovering new insights that help improve knowledge within the scientific community.

Five former rebels from the Kalayaan Center in Davao de Oro participated in in-depth interviews, which lasted from 50 minutes to 1 hour, about their experiences with radicalization and reintegration issues. It employs purposive sampling to identify participants who can provide informed insights into the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The researcher closely coordinated with the Kalayaan Center through the personnel of the Provincial Social Welfare and Development Office of the Provincial Government of Davao de Oro as gatekeepers to help identify the participants. To ensure ethical compliance and

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data privacy, informed consent was obtained through a consent form, and participants' identities were protected using coded names to maintain confidentiality.

Thematic Analysis was conducted through manual coding to convert participants' responses from the in-depth interviews into theoretical constructs. This includes identifying, organizing, and interpreting themes within the qualitative data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-economic profile of the research participants

The socio-economic profile of the research participants shows that they are mostly male, aged between 25 and 50 years. They typically have low to moderate educational backgrounds, mostly completing elementary to junior high school. Most participants work in government-related roles, such as government jobs and membership in the CAFGU. One participant is involved in farming, which reflects limited but diverse opportunities for work. Their involvement in extremist or terrorist groups spans from 6 to 29 years. This suggests that in Davao de Oro, a long exposure to armed movements often starts in early adulthood or adolescence. It also highlights how limited education and restricted economic opportunities may have contributed to ongoing participation in these groups.

Code Name	Age	Gender	Educational Attainment	Occupation	Years in the Extremist/ Terrorist Group
Joseph	37	Male	Elementary	Government Employee	12
Leo	31	Male	Junior High School	Government Employee	8
Arjie	33	Male	Elementary	CAFGU	7
Nonoy	50	Male	Junior High School	Farmer	29
Amor	25	Female	Senior High School	CAFGU	6

Table 1. Socio-economic Profile of the Study Participants

Lived Experiences in Radicalization and Deradicalization

Codes Derived From Relevant Narratives	Counts	Axial Themes
On Radicalization		
Absence of Government	5	*Structural and Social Conditions*
Personal and Family Hardships	5	
Armed Struggle as Service to the People	5	*Ideological Conditioning*
Early Exposure to Armed Groups and Ideology	4	
On Deradicalization and Disengagement		
Internal Inequality and Resource Injustice	3	*Structural Disillusionment and Internal Contradictions*
Disillusionment with Organizational Hypocrisy	4	
Family Hardship and Moral Injury	3	*Personal and Family-Centered Turning Points*
Exhaustion, Hunger, and Physical Breakdown	3	
Fear, Insecurity, and Threats After Exit	4	*Pathways to Reintegration and Reorientation*
Conditional Trust in Government and Reintegration Programs	3	
Reclaiming Agency through Work, Service, and Skills	3	

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The Structural and Social Conditions

The participants experience the government's limited, inconsistent, and mostly ineffective presence in remote and marginalized communities. This is especially true in delivering basic social services, such as healthcare, education, livelihood support, justice, and infrastructure. Instead of saying there was no government involvement, participants expressed a sense of a minimal presence; government institutions were technically there, but did not respond in a timely, fair, and effective way. This led to feelings of neglect, exclusion, and abandonment, which increased distrust in formal government structures. In this situation, non-state armed groups were often seen as the main service providers. They offered immediate, visible, and accessible help, discipline, and conflict resolution. According to Jackson:

"In our area, if there was a simple drug case or theft, it was not the government, police, or barangay officials who intervened; it was the NPA. We never felt the presence of the government there when I became aware of things. In my view, the government at that time was useless because it was absent."

Consequently, participants described long-term experiences with poverty, food insecurity, illness, interrupted education, and the weight of early responsibility. For many, survival often relied on family work, informal support networks, or unsafe coping methods. These struggles were not just single events; they were ongoing pressures that shaped life paths, emotional resilience, and moral decisions. Leo stated that:

"I joined the movement because, based on what I understood, this was the solution to poverty and suffering."

The responses of these participants clearly highlight the basic structural and social conditions that influenced their experiences and choices. This vulnerability shows what Chambers (2014) describes as the deprivation trap, where linked disadvantages limit people's ability to meet their basic needs and escape hardship. Persistent poverty leads to frustration and discontent. As a result, some people may see violent movements as valid options for social or political change (Holden, 2013).

The Ideological Conditioning

Armed engagement was seen as a moral duty to protect communities, tackle social injustices, and fill the gaps left by weak government institutions. Carrying arms became a symbol of sacrifice and service to others. Participants showed deep support for marginalized groups. They considered discipline, teamwork, and obedience crucial for maintaining social order. The armed movement served as a distinct moral authority, offering equality, mutual aid, and responsiveness. Amor shared that:

"I even felt that I fell in love with the Lumad communities back then. When I began organizing, I saw their actual living conditions. There were no proper facilities, most of them had not gone to school, there was no adequate food, and many children had bloated stomachs because even basic deworming medicine did not reach them. That was where I truly saw the problem.''

Moreover, participants first encountered armed groups and their ideas during a crucial time in their lives, often in childhood or early adolescence. This early exposure influenced how they understood social order, justice, and shared responsibility before they developed independent critical thinking. Engaging with armed actors, whether through family ties, community presence, or direct involvement, exposed participants to diverse governance systems, revolutionary narratives, and the acceptance of armed struggle as a legitimate means to address social inequalities. Nonoy, said:

"When I was still a student, I was already being oriented by the NPA because the NPA had deeply penetrated our community and exerted strong influence. When I was in high school, we were made to understand, as part of the student curriculum, the issue of the steep increase in tuition fees. According to them, the best solution was for the movement to launch a revolution that would respond to the needs of students."

The participants' responses clearly illustrate Loesch's (2017) push and pull factors in radicalization, where push factors, such as personal and family hardships, poverty, and the absence or weak presence of government services, created vulnerability and a sense of injustice that made participants receptive to alternative forms of authority. Pull factors, including early exposure to armed groups, ideological conditioning, and the perception of armed struggle as a moral duty to serve communities, directly drew them into the movement by offering purpose, belonging, and social recognition.

Structural Disillusionment and Internal Contradictions

The participant observed that the organization's resource allocation was unfair. Elite groups received far more benefits compared to regular members. This inequality became more concerning as it disproportionately harmed families and children. The participant saw them as the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in this system. According to Joseph:

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"My problem began there, especially when support was delayed due to operational issues. What I noticed was that others received ₱2,000, ₱1,500, or ₱1,000, even though we belonged to the same unit. I kept asking myself, "Why is it like this?" We were at the center of operations, we were the most exhausted, and yet we were treated more strictly, while others were treated more leniently."

The participant reflected that this unfair allocation of resources revealed a clear contradiction between the organization's stated values. These values focus on serving the people and promoting equality. However, its actual practices are marked by moral double standards. Nonoy shared:

"Everything seems pointless. If we were truly fighting the government, then the Party or the movement should have had sufficient funds to meet the people's needs so they would no longer rely on the government. Yet we continued to tell people to go to DSWD and other government agencies because that was where the funds were."

This unequal treatment led to a rising sense of unfairness and moral doubt. This idea aligns with relative deprivation theory, which suggests that people feel dissatisfied and disillusioned due to perceived gaps, rather than simply lacking resources (Gurr, 2015). Moreover, internal inequalities weaken group cohesion and undermine leadership. This is especially true when disadvantaged members feel that their struggles are not acknowledged or addressed (Cederman et al., 2013).

Personal and Family-Centered Turning Points

The participants faced significant family struggles. They dealt with children going hungry, lack of support for family needs, illness, and difficult situations with their parents. These challenges created deep feelings of guilt and moral conflict. The participant found it hard to balance their responsibilities to their loved ones with the demands and sacrifices needed by the organization. Joseph said:

"It was especially painful because there were times when my child would cry from hunger. I experienced this repeatedly for several years."

In the personal level, participants faced extreme physical hardships. These included chronic hunger, illness, injuries, and severe deprivation. The situation became so dire that it was no longer seen as a sacrifice; it turned into a threat to survival. Arjie shared:

"I even tried eating fern shoots from a creek full of leeches. I felt like a goat, just pulling them out and eating them. Even if it caused itching, as long as my stomach was filled, it didn't matter. There were fruits from trees that people said were poisonous and would cause itching, but I still tried eating them. After a while, we did itch a little, but only mildly."

Moral injury goes beyond typical trauma frameworks. It highlights the emotional weight of guilt, shame, or betrayal associated with moral and ethical failures in high-stakes situations (Nash & Litz, 2013). Additionally, ongoing food insecurity and severe hunger in conflict areas increase the risk of malnutrition, illness, and reduced functioning for both adults and children (Makinde et al., 2023).

Pathways to Reintegration and Reorientation

After leaving the organization, the participant continued to feel fear and insecurity. They faced ongoing threats and surveillance from both the movement and state authorities. This situation created a constant sense of vulnerability. The exposure to possible harm led to increased anxiety and uncertainty as the participant navigated a dangerous environment where their safety was always at risk. In Joseph's story, he shared:

"At the beginning of my surrender, I was worried about my safety from the military because intelligence units had issued threats against me due to my older brother, who had not yet surrendered. When my brother eventually surrendered, I felt more at ease. However, my fear toward the movement intensified. When my former comrades and my brother surrendered, I learned that there were serious threats against me since I left.

While trust was not total, the government seemed more stable and consistently present than the movement. Programs like E-CLIP offered immediate support, but since they were one-time efforts, their long-term impact was limited. In Arjie's experience, he mentioned:

"If I compare my life before and now, life was much harder back then. My situation now is slightly better, but only slightly. Even if I do not receive E-CLIP, I will not return."

The participants started to regain personal control by moving from armed struggle to productive activities. This change involved taking on meaningful jobs, joining community service projects, acquiring new skills through training programs, and exploring legal avenues to earn a living and make a positive impact. Amor shared:

"Our values of impartiality, which are helping people regardless, still remain. Perhaps what the Party taught us about organizing, about identifying people's problems that need help, about analyzing whether an issue is accurate or legitimate, or what we called SICA, can still be applied even outside the movement."

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The Capability Approach of Nussbaum (2011) combines social, political, and personal aspects of well-being. Reintegration involves more than just material support; it focuses on increasing the genuine freedoms of former combatants so they can lead lives they value. Skills training, community involvement, legal work, and mental health support fit into this approach, helping to restore personal agency, dignity, and social functionality.

CONCLUSION

The presented data, it shows that social and economic hardships, along with limited access to education, jobs, and government services, played a big role in why participants joined extremist groups. Early exposure to extreme ideas and the belief that armed struggle was a moral obligation intensified their involvement. Additionally, personal and family struggles pushed them further toward these movements.

Successful deradicalization and reintegration happened because of disappointment with inequalities in organizations, helpful government programs, skills training, and community involvement. To encourage successful reintegration and lower the chance of returning to armed groups, it's crucial to address structural inequalities, provide steady social services, and empower former combatants with meaningful work and skill development.

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