

# An Exploration of the Meaning-making of Vehement Hardliners in Controversial Social Issues: Reactions to Youth Unrest in Suburbs of Gothenburg Sweden

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## Introduction

The solution, as I see it, is first to impose a curfew for those under 18 years and after 6 pm. Then those who are caught in the act should be sent to a correctional institution, no pampering and nice dinners, there should be water and bread. Then parents and children with a foreign background should be expelled from the country for an undetermined time, with immediate effectuation. Only then the authority has done its job. If the hooligans come to my street, there will be a blood bath!

[Reader comment on a newspaper forum, no. 49]

During the last few years there have been a number of incidents in suburbs of in my own hometown, Gothenburg, Sweden, involving groups of young people who have set fire to cars and attacked police and rescue service personnel with stones. The events have not really been comparable to major riots involving large numbers of people, like in Paris or large UK cities. The number of participants in the disturbances has been relatively small, with less than 50 participants in most cases. As in many other cities, the disturbances have taken place in suburbs characterized by low-income residents, high unemployment rates, especially among youth, and a high proportion of immigrants from the Middle East, the Balkans, Somalia and many other countries. Since such incidents have occurred repeatedly over at least a decade, the general impression is that no effective strategies exist to stop the violence to people and material belongings.

This article does not focus on the troubles in the suburbs as such, but rather on the reactions to them. I am interested in a better understanding of the part of the population that advocate very harsh, radical actions in response to the troubles, and hold contemptuous opinions about the youth involved. The purpose of the article is rather modest. I will report on an explorative effort to pinpoint the properties of the meaning-making of "vehement hardliners" (explained below) and outline a tentative framework that might provide a point of departure for further, more comprehensive, investigations of the role that complexity awareness plays in the formation of views on controversial societal issues. At this stage, no efforts have been made to review

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previous research on related issues, present a stringent analytical framework or conduct more penetrating analyses.

### **Cars set on Fire in Gothenburg Suburbs**

The car burnings and ensuing violence occur in periods. One such period with a lot of incidents occurred during August and the beginning of September 2009. On Friday night, 5 September, cars were set to fire in two different suburbs. On Saturday, the morning newspaper of Gothenburg, Göteborgs-Posten (GP), published several articles about the events, one reporting on what happened in the night before, another with a chronology of incidents during the past month. On the website of GP, a reader forum was opened on Saturday morning shortly before 9 a.m. The headline of the reader forum was: When will it stop? How should the police deal with the young? Website readers started to write comments. In the 2 hours and 45 minutes the forum remained open, 147 comments were posted in the forum.

I happened to see this reader forum while surfing a couple of news websites at about 11 a.m. I got very interested, for reasons I will explain further down, and started to download one page after another of the comments. However, I had just arrived at the most recent comments when the forum suddenly was unavailable. I wrote a mail to the editor in charge and asked for the reason, and got the following response:

We shut down the commentating, because the posts didn't keep in line with the topic question, but got more and more racist. "Put them in a cage in the Borås Zoo" etc.

Indeed. This kind of reader forum is filled with scornful, aggressive, often openly racist opinions, and the actions the commentators advocate are often violent or at least very harsh.

### **Discussion Forums on the Internet**

During the last 4 years, I have spent many, many hours reading posts on open discussion forums on the internet. I have been a reader of two different kinds of forums. One is the aforementioned reader forums of Swedish newspapers. These reader forums are only opened in connection with some articles, presumably when the news reported can be expected to trigger different reactions among readers. Such a forum is usually open only for a limited time, usually a day or a couple of days. However, the number of posts can become large (several hundred) in a short time, as readers comment on a topic they have opinions about. Usually there is a starting question formulated by the website editor, but readers don't feel very obliged to keep their comments focused on answering this question. The threshold to participate is low, participants do not have to register in order to post comments. I have downloaded and read more than 15 such reader forums on various topics, most of them related to events involving violence in public spaces.

The other type of forum is permanent open discussion forums, where anyone who registers a user account can start a discussion thread. The particular forum I have read almost daily for four years is called Flashback ([www.flashback.org](http://www.flashback.org)). Flashback is a Swedish language forum with a large numbers of sections on various topics. There is one section called Aktuella brott och

kriminalfall, which would translate something like Current crime cases. As soon as media report a new murder or other crime of general interest, someone starts a thread about the case and invites other forum participants to join in the discussion. The basic idea is to find out, through collective effort, what happened and why. Such threads can continue for months and even years, and a single thread can come to comprise tens of thousands of posts. I have, over the last four years, read far more than a hundred thousand such posts on the Flashback forum.

One of my motives for doing this is that the internet forums offer me as a researcher a fascinating insight into how (some) people think and feel about issues of societal significance. Since the mid-1980s, I have been deeply interested in the field of adult development. I have in various ways, informally and in formal research, studied the variability in adult meaning-making regarding socially relevant issues, in particular in terms of complexity awareness (see e.g. Jordan, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2011; Jordan & Lundin, 2001; Jordan, Andersson & Ringnér, 2013). This interest is not merely academic: I do believe that understanding and working with the structures of awareness of individuals and collectives constitutes significant opportunities to contribute to a society with less suffering, more dignity and better lives for human beings. Reading internet discussion forums with a mind trained in discerning patterns of meaning-making of course leads to a spontaneous process of recognizing certain patterns and generating hypotheses about underlying structures.

This article focusses one particular reader forum, which I have studied in a more systematic way in order to pinpoint the properties of the reasoning and develop a hypothetical explanatory framework. However, the background for this case study is a comprehensive familiarity with a very large volume of similar material.

### **”Internet hate”**

Anyone who has been reading internet forum comments on controversial topics has encountered a particular kind of statements. In the Swedish public debate, there is a name for this category of comments: *näthatet*, the net hate. Participants pour contempt over certain categories of people, who are described in stereotypical, often racist, terms. The tone is judgmental, aggressive and completely devoid of empathy. The posters advocate simple, harsh (often very violent and radical) measures. The messages take the form of firm assertions: what is to be thought of and done about the issue is presented as self-evident. There are no signs of a willingness to inquire into causes and alternative courses of action. On the one hand, we should be careful not to make the same mistakes as these people do, to bundle individuals with different patterns of reasoning into one category, assuming that if they show one of the characteristics, they also have all the other. On the other hand, there really seems to be a recognizable pattern, with many people expressing opinions that do show several of the characteristics described above. For lack of a better term, I will call people who advocate this kind of views vehement hardliners. The term is really meant to be descriptive, rather than evaluative.

I am interested in exploring the structural properties of the meaning-making that engenders (or at least allows) judgmental, simple and undifferentiated views on problematic societal issues. I think that we can safely assume that this kind of meaning-making is an important causal component in many serious societal conflicts and other violent actions.

## General Properties of the Data Set

The setting has some salient characteristics that have to be kept in mind when interpreting the data. Participants in a newspaper reader forum are anonymous to each other. They chose a signature when they post and I have in no case seen that real full names have been used. The comments are made spontaneously, without much deliberation, since the forum is open only for a limited time. It is likely that many comments are written on the spur of the moment, perhaps in a state of being upset about a piece of news or by a comment from another participant. We cannot know what the poster would say about the issue in another kind of situation, e.g. when being face to face with other people with different views. We also do not know whether the opinions voiced in a reader forum are indicative of how a person would actually behave in decision-making situations, e.g. when voting in elections or when participating in a neighbourhood meeting. However, there are people who quite consistently advocate the same kind of harsh measures that a lot of forum participants propose. Some of them organize in political parties reflecting these kinds of views, of which some draw enough votes in elections to get represented in political assemblies.

As research material, reader forums of newspapers have the limitation that posts mostly are rather short and that most participants only write one comment. We cannot explore, whether by going through more statements from particular individuals, nor by asking questions, the wider pattern of meaning-making. We only get glimpses of the narratives and perspectives behind the rather brief statements made in the comments. On the other hand, I believe that the kind of views expressed by many of the forum participants are actually representative for the views some people hold on to, but they are views that are, so to speak, fragile if talked about in an research interview situation. In other words, it is probably difficult to get people with this kind of views to speak their mind in a straight-forward way if interviewed by a researcher with recording equipment running.

The limitation is, of course, a major one if we want to arrive at more solid conclusions about structures of meaning-making. However, I believe that this kind of data is useful for explorative studies that can lead to the formulation of empirically grounded hypotheses. Such hypotheses would then have to be tested using richer sets of empirical data, such as interviews, participatory observation or action research (such as engaging people in online discussions).

## Quantitative Description of the Data Set

During the 2 hours and 45 minutes the forum was open, 147 comments were posted by 112 signatures. I have, when reporting numbers below, assumed that there is a 1–1 correspondence between signatures used and individuals. That is, I assume that the same individual has not posted with different signatures, nor that different individuals has used the same signature.<sup>2</sup>

Most participants, 90, only wrote a single post. 15 participants wrote 2 posts, 5 wrote 3 posts, 1 wrote 5 posts and 1 wrote 7 posts.

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible that one individual posts with different signatures, of course, but not very likely.

I made a content analysis in order to identify different categories of content in the posts. I identified five more common categories:

- 74 posts (by 63 different signatures) contained suggestions about what action ought to be taken; measures.
- 42 posts contained critical comments, generally negative value judgements, about certain categories of people: the perpetrators, politicians, journalists, the police or parents.
- 34 posts contained general comments about immigration policies or other aspects of societal conditions and trends.
- 12 posts contained critical comments about other posts.
- 11 posts contained some idea about causes of the disturbances.

Of course one and the same post may contain statements belonging to several of these categories. A few posts did not contain any of these categories of statements. One post was difficult to make sense of, probably the poster was critical of the website editor. One post demanded that the forum should be closed, because of the racist comments. One stated doubt that the perpetrators really were local young people, another asked other posters what they believe about future developments.<sup>3</sup> One poster just expressed personal strong reactions to the events.

## A Closer Look at Proposed Measures

As mentioned above, 63 of the 112 participants advocated some type of measures. I have sorted the proposed measures into categories (Table 1). Some posters have offered more than one type of measure, then each is counted into the appropriate category below. In the cases where the same person proposed the same type of measures in more than one post, it was counted only once.

Table 1: Different types of proposed measures

Number of posters who advocated different types of measures	
a. Harsh measures towards perpetrators*	33
b. Deportation of perpetrators (sometimes also their parents)	21
c. Punishment of parents (including deportation)	12
d. General repressive measures in affected suburbs (curfew)	7
e. Increased patrolling (police and others)	6
f. Dialogue with young people and residents	6
g. Parents must take more responsibility	5
h. Residents should strike back (e.g. vigilance committees)	4
i. More restrictive immigration policies	4
j. Young people should be put to work	2
k. More collaboration between different actors	1
l. Increase support in war-torn areas rather than receive refugees	1

\* Not counting "deportation of perpetrators," since this is reported separately.

<sup>3</sup> "Will it come to civil war? What do you believe? Who will win? The Swedes, or immigrants who are used to war?"

I count the categories a, b, c, d, h, and i as expressions of "vehement hardliner" positions. Of course, the advocacy of measures that include painful consequences for perpetrators of violence is not in itself an indication that a person also has a contemptuous attitude, but there seem to be a pattern among many forum participants comprised of a combination of the above-mentioned properties. Of the 63 persons who advocated at least one type of measure, 50 were classified as "vehement hardliners."<sup>4</sup> Several of the remaining 13 also used formulations that indicated similar feelings, but they did not actually mention any of the measures classified as "hardliner."

Again, we should be careful not to assume that advocating one of the six "hardliner" measures mean that the person also would endorse all the others. For example, advocating harsh punishments for perpetrators does not necessarily mean that one would also like whole families to be deported.

Many of the commentators who did not advocate any specific type of measures, but commented on, for example, another participant's comment or general political issues, could also qualify as "vehement hardliners." Some of them are strongly sarcastic or bitterly critical of Swedish immigration policies, for example.

Let us now look at what forum participants actually say.<sup>5</sup> I have chosen posts that offer examples of the six types of hardliner measures listed above. Many of the posts illustrate several different characteristics of "vehement hardliner" attitudes and positions, as will be discussed later on.

## Harsh Measures

What is here counted as "harsh measures" are statements about what ought to be done that go well beyond current practices within the legal system. Some posters advocate violent actions against the perpetrators, others call for harsher measures within the framework of the judicial apparatus. Some statements are not very specific about exactly what should be done, but are emphatic about the need to "stop pampering." Here are four examples, illustrative of somewhat different flavours:

The police should be police

The police ought to do as in the home countries of the youngsters. Beat the shit to pieces and there will be no stone-throwing. [11]

Get rid of them

Send the rubbish to a deserted island in the Atlantic and let them finish off each other!!! Our tax money goes to these vermin when it could be used for children with cancer in our hospitals. Damn it, mankind is so damaged. [99]

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<sup>4</sup> 26 persons mentioned one of the types of "hardliner" measures; 18 persons mentioned two types; 5 persons mentioned three types; and 1 person mentioned four of the types (see the quoted post in the beginning of this article).

<sup>5</sup> The posts were numbered in chronological order. They were translated from Swedish by the author as close to the original text as possible in terms of style (including lack of punctuation, for example), connotations and substance. All examples given are the full text of the respective post, they have not been edited. The title of each post is the poster's own.

#### Hard measures

It is time that we show that we don't accept this any longer. Whether Swedish or immigrants. That they complain about not having a job isn't surprising. They don't give a damn about working in school and believe that everything will be served to them on a silver platter. I live in Hisingen and I see how all the children don't give shit about anything. This isn't about hating immigrants, they don't give a damn about conducting themselves. It is really high time to get tough. No more pampering. The police should arrest the rabble!! [115]

#### Change of law is needed

Change the law so that the police can use its resources to suppress the rioting. Curfew in the evenings and detention camps in Lappland for an indefinite time for the vandals who are caught.

Reprisals against parents to youth who have not reached the age of criminal responsibility, e.g. deportation. [38]

### **Deportation of Perpetrators**

21 participants, a third of those who suggested measures, advocated deportation of perpetrators. These posters took, seemingly, for granted that the perpetrators have an immigrant background (which in many cases is probably true, but since few perpetrators have been identified by the police, this is not an established fact). Several of the comments in this category explicitly stated that the solution to the problem is simple: if Sweden starts to deport perpetrators, the unrest will stop. Here are three representative examples:

#### Deportation

...if it now is this way that immigrants and their children is the problem, the regulations ought to be changed so that even 2nd generation immigrants can be deported to the home country of their parents so that they get to know how good they had it in Sweden. Simply deport those who don't behave. [47]

#### Military

I think one should reward them with a journey to the Middle East! ONE-WAY ticket, we can afford that and we get a whole lot of free apartments for youth who behave themselves. Simple, cheap solution? [134]

#### Bye Bye

Send those who can't adjust home, it's in fact rather simple. What would have happened if we had behaved as they do if we went to their home countries. Well, we would probably have been stoned or assassinated in some other barbarian way! [121]

### **Punishment of Parents**

12 participants included suggestions to punish the parents of perpetrators in their comments, mostly in conjunction with other measures (see e.g. post 38 quoted above). Below is one example where punishment of parents is a prominent ingredient.

The police should get tough

Hooligans think it is great to tease the police - and other citizens who behave themselves. Give them a lesson, deport when possible to prison terms in the home countries. We shouldn't pay for their rehabilitation (?) [question mark in original] in the prisons here. Make the parents liable for paying the costs – or put them in prison, preferably in their home countries. The problems cannot be talked away – talk doesn't work on criminals. [12]

### **General Repressive Measures in Affected Suburbs**

Some participants suggested increased patrolling by the police or others. Such proposals were not counted as "repressive measures" if not accompanied with harsher conceptions, such as a general curfew or using military for surveillance. The first example included below is particularly belligerent, suggesting that perpetrators should be shot if they don't comply with orders.

Martial law

Impose martial law and curfew after 11 pm. Politicians of the region should actively participate with the police and rescue services to secure all areas.

If disturbances continue, warning shots should be fired and then effective fire on those individuals who don't understand anything else.

Since some don't adopt the customs of the places they go to, we have to start using the customs they are familiar with. [97]

I think

1. Impose CURFEW in affected areas after 8 p.m. until the rioting has ended. 2. Use military and the Home Guard to patrol the streets. 3. Arrest the suspects. [2]

The police ought to retreat one step...

... and send in the military and the Home Guard. Those who destroy their own areas don't want the police there, and also no human rights. So impose a curfew and arrest everyone who doesn't comply. If the parents cannot account for where their children are, arrest them too. They should feel it PROPERLY now! There will be no end otherwise. The police should not use their resources for this kind of nonsense! They should be able to focus on "real people" and "real crime." [104]

### **Residents Should Strike Back**

Four participants advocated that residents in the suburbs should get tough and use violence to stop the young rioters.

Response to JAhman

But since these youth themselves burn down youth centers, for example, and other things the society has fixed for them and the fact that they have frightened away night wandering adults, who cooperate with the authorities, proves that the society makes efforts. But these individuals show their gratitude by destroying it.



If they don't want police and order in the suburbs, I suggest that we outlaw these youth, then vigilance committees are free to beat them up royally without penalty. Pay them back in kind! [72]

Take back

Lock them up and throw away the key. Demand responsibility of the parents, those who can't look after their children and teenagers (up to 19 years, responsibility) should be punished, if they cannot manage they should turn to the social services. People who get children should raise them and not blame the society. Youngsters and vandals who burn cars and throw stones at policemen, fire trucks and trams and blame it on their being terrorized and being outsiders in the society? Vigilance committees soon, COUNTERATTACK! [5]

### **More restrictive Immigration Policies**

Of the participants who explicitly advocated some kind of measure, just four pointed out a restriction of immigration as a key measure. However, quite a few other posters made general comments about how the unrest in the suburbs is a consequence of too liberal immigration policies, or that they would now vote for Sverigedemokraterna, a populist party whose main mission is to radically restrict immigration. Below is a particularly emphatic statement of this sentiment, which I believe most would label racist:

The reason for this is the immigration of moslems.

The solution to this problem is effectuated as follows: 1. Stop the immigration of moslems. 2. Start a repatriation program for moslems. 3. Prosecute the moslem parents who have children of minor age who terrorize in the streets. 4. Educate about the doctrine of Islam so ordinary people understand what it is. [146]

### **A Further Observation**

As can be seen in the examples above, quite a few participants use sweeping, undifferentiated formulations about perpetrators, parents and immigrants. In a few cases, this tendency to treat people as an undifferentiated collective goes one step further:

Reinforce the police

More police, maybe military to these areas. But NO ambulances or fire trucks. If somebody gets hurt they have to fend for themselves, if they start fires let it burn down. I think an earlier post was good with water bombs with colour :) [81]

Re henke

Youth centre are you kidding now, or what? if there is anyplace where they have invested a lot of money on youth like in rosengård they built a new youth centre there it was only 1 month or 2 then it was burnt down no this is something completely different like hate of Swedes [125; lack of punctuation in original]

These two posters seem to perceive the perpetrators (and even the suburb residents in general) as a monolithic collective. There seems to be no awareness of the heterogeneity of the people

involved, that the perpetrators is actually a very, very small number both of residents in general and of the local youth.

## About Proposed Measures

In order to unpack the properties of the meaning-making structure common to the statements I will be using two angles: (1) to find descriptors for the actual content of the statements, i.e. what is present; and (2) to look for what is conspicuously absent in the statements (but might be highly relevant to the issue at hand). One reason for proceeding in this way is the hypothesis that people think and act as they do partly because they have not considered various elements of the complex web of causes, conditions and potential consequences in which a particular issue is embedded. Only through being oblivious to certain considerations, it could be argued, is it possible to uphold some of the hardliner opinions.

## Characteristics of Contents

### Four characteristics of the statements made

I believe it is fair to describe the character of the statements of the vehement hardliners in terms of four elements:

- Problem and solution are seen as simple (in the sense of uncomplicated, unifactorial)
- Categories of people are treated in undifferentiated terms
- There is a belief that harsh measures will be effective
- The affective tone is contemptuous and vehement

### Problem and Solution are seen as Simple (Unifactorial)

The discourse in the posts is characterized by simple statements about the problem and what ought to be done about it. There is seldom any consideration of underlying causes for the unrest. When vehement hardliners at all mention causes, they mostly blame too liberal immigration policies. Explicitly or implicitly immigrants (often specified as moslems) are seen as people with fixed characteristics, and those fixed characteristics is the explanation of their destructive behaviour. The measures proposed are also simple in the sense that only one or a few uncomplicated actions are proposed as solutions to the problem. Several posters explicitly assert that the problem and its solution are simple (see post 47, 121, 134 above for examples): either people should just stop their destructive behaviour, or harsh punishments or deportations will stop the problem.

Some posters comment on alternative suggestions referring to contributing causes for the troubles and explicitly reject, sometimes with a sarcastic tone, explanations other than the inherent badness of immigrants. For example, a suggestion that a lack of youth centers may be part of the explanation for the unrest is ridiculed by a couple of posters.

Vehement hardliners seem to think that it is an easy thing for people to stop acting in antisocial ways and start behaving differently. There is no mention of any conditions that might

constitute an obstacle to such a shift in behaviour. The immigrant youth simply ought to understand that even if they are used to other conditions in their native countries, they should conform to Swedish laws and mores when in Sweden.

### **Categories of People are Treated in Undifferentiated Terms**

Youth, immigrants, residents of suburbs and sometimes other categories of people (such as police, politicians) are talked about as if they all share the same characteristics. Vehement hardliners don't seem to feel a need to make differentiations, e.g. by pointing out that their comments only apply to certain subgroups. Statements that can be viewed as blatantly racist, in the sense of attributing collective negative fixed characteristics to ethnic or religious categories of people, are relatively common. A few posts advocate using radical measures, like deportation or harsh punishments indiscriminately towards these collectives (see post 146 above for an example).

### **There is a Belief that Harsh Measures will be Effective**

The strong emphasis on using (only) harsh measures to deal with the problem seems closely related to the simpleness of the meaning-making. Proposals about what ought to be done seem to assume that causality is simple: pain will, if it is strong enough, force perpetrators to change their behaviour. Reasoning about causality is linear and only proceeds in one step. There are no efforts to seek further explanations of the destructive behaviour, nor any concerns about possible negative consequences of the remedies proposed.

### **The Affective Tone is Contemptuous and Vehement**

Many of the statements are permeated by contempt, vehemence and disparagement. Strongly sarcastic comments about various categories of people are common, not only of perpetrators and immigrants, but also about politicians, journalists and other representatives of a society that, according to the vehement hardliners, are naïve, concerned with political correctness and cowardly.

### **Conspicuous Absences**

When comparing the statements of the vehement hardliners with other views on similar events and problems, it is obvious that certain types of thoughts and lines of reasoning are conspicuous by their absence among vehement hardliners. Some such absences are the following:

- Explanations that point to societal conditions, such as marginalization, unemployment, barriers to the labour market for young immigrants, residential segregation, poverty. Consequently there are no proposals for measures targeting systemic conditions.
- Explanations that point to social mechanisms, like lack of appropriate socialization conditions in families with a history of fleeing from war-torn areas and being marked by traumatic experiences, torn social relationships and a loss of customary norm and identity systems. Consequently there are no proposals for measures that aim at remediating the shortcomings of the social conditions close to the perpetrators.

- Conceptions about internal psychological structures and processes among the perpetrators that might both explain self-images and behaviour, and constitute obstacles to development of socially adjusted identities and life trajectories. Consequently there are no proposals for measures that might scaffold development of ego structures and of constructive self-images and skills.
- Reflections about possible negative short- and long-term consequences of harsh measures (such as a escalating antagonism, stigmatization, bitterness, possible loss of legal rights of individuals and the general climate in the society). Consequently there is no reasoning about how such consequences might be prevented or managed.
- Considerations about the difficulties involved in identifying and seize perpetrators and bring them to court.
- Considerations about the possibility of actually carrying out some of the more radical suggestions, such as mass deportation of Moslems, in relation to, for example, Sweden's obligations to international law and conventions.
- Empathy with and benevolence in relation to people in unfavourable life circumstances (which is just the opposite side of the contemptuous and vehement affective tone mentioned above).

I will summarize these absences into four categories:

- Systemic measures: Absence of measures that address societal conditions in general and social conditions in the immediate environment of the perpetrators.
- Measures to scaffold individual development: Absence of measures that would scaffold development of skills and self-images of youth with established anti-social behaviour.
- Problematization of implementation: Absence of consideration of difficulties in implementation and problematic consequences of harsh measures.
- Empathy: Absence of empathy and benevolence in relation to perpetrators and other parties concerned.

## **Eight Properties Calling for Explanation**

According to the interpretation of the data made in the two preceding sections, there are eight properties of the meaning-making patterns of vehement hardliners that call for explanation: Statements are simple, undifferentiated, harsh and contemptuous, and there is an absence of systemic measures, measures to scaffold individual development, problematization of implementation and empathy.

As has been evident from the discussion above, I believe that one part of an explanation for the existence of the "vehement hardliner" views is to be sought in properties of the subjects' meaning-making structures, in particular in the failure of the vehement hardliners to notice and consider causes, conditions and potential consequences of the whole issue complex. Of course a perspective that focusses patterns of individual cognition is only one part of an explanation of the phenomenon of vehement hardliners. Many other explanatory perspectives would be needed for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon, for example consideration of individual emotional biographies (such as attachment types), social constructions of self and others, effects of the properties of online communication technologies, development of socio-economic patterns

in the society, media practices regarding reporting of crime, failures of the educational system, and so on. However, a deeper understanding of the internal operations of the meaning-making that leads to vehement hardliner views seems to be a significant contribution to this rather disturbing societal phenomenon.

In an earlier Integral Review article (Jordan, 2011), I outlined a conceptual framework for analysing structures of meaning-making in the context of grappling with complex societal issues. A key concept for me is complexity awareness, which in short points to the degree of awareness a person has of the possibility that issues may be embedded in complex webs of complex causal relationships and conditions (such as being conditioned by properties of the system they are embedded in). An important aspect of the concept is that it points to the expectation (or "pre-understanding") that things may be complex in a way that warrants attention, rather than manifested knowledge about actual complex patterns.

In figure 1, I suggest a tentative explanatory model based on the hypothesis that "weak complexity awareness" is a major contributing factor for explaining the eight properties described above. The basic argument is that vehement hardliner views are only sustainable when complexity awareness is weak. The data set used in this exploratory study is too limited to allow testing to what extent the connections outlined in figure 1 are meaningful as ways to understand and explain the views of vehement hardliners.



Figure 1: A tentative explanatory framework for vehement hardliner views

I expect that a more thorough study of the properties of meaning-making structures among vehement hardliners, in particular if based on interviews or participatory research (actually engaging vehement hardliners in discussions about their views), would show that the model in figure 1 is too simplified to accurately explain the inner workings of vehement hardliner reasoning. However, I do believe a study designed to critically explore to what extent the

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connective patterns outlined in figure 1 are valid would yield useful and highly meaningful insights into a the nature of political meaning-making among groups of people who actually say they want to use violence and other very harsh methods for dealing with societal problems. Societal tensions and conflicts may escalate to become serious threats to the possibilities to manage our societies in constructive ways. When this happens, we need knowledge that allows us to develop skillful strategies to deal with destructive political views and actions.