

CREST

IDEOLOGICAL TRANSMISSION II PEERS, EDUCATION AND PRISONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE AND CONTENT

This is the second in a series of synthetic research reports on ideological transmission produced by the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST). It focuses on peer-to-peer relationships as a context for ideological transmission, particularly in the context of education and prisons.

The research questions that inform these reports are as follows:

- a. *How* is political and religious ideology (beliefs, values, attitudes, and embodied practices) passed on between and across generations and to newcomers?
- b. *Who* is responsible for ideological transmission?
- c. *Where* and *when* does ideological transmission take place?
- d. How do these issues apply to the transmission of extremist and terrorist ideologies?

These questions will be addressed across the three stages of the research review, with findings summarised in the final report.

Our early analysis of the research literature suggested an approach to organising the reviews based on the life cycle and the general process of socialisation in and through (a) the family (Report 1), (b) peers, particularly in the contexts of education and prison (Report 2), and (c) political and religious organisations (Report 3). This life-cycle perspective builds on earlier developmental approaches to socialisation.



WHAT THIS RESEARCH REPORT COVERS

1. This second report focuses on secondary socialisation, and considers ideological transmission within social groups (peers), centred on educational settings, including schools, universities and university societies, and prisons.
2. Ideological transmission is interpreted as the passing on of ideology from one person to another. We treat ideology as a broad concept, encompassing both political and religious ideas, and including beliefs, values, and practices.
3. This report is structured in three parts. The first considers communication and learning among peers, and focuses on their similarities, relationships and influences. It also considers the positive and negative impacts of peers on mobilisation and engagement in terrorism.
4. Part two focuses on the important role of education in secondary socialisation. It reviews perspectives on education as a tool for ideological instruction, both political and religious, and considers young people as active agents as well as passive recipients of ideological transmission. It looks at educational venues – where ideas,

beliefs and values are learnt and shared – in schools, universities and their student societies.

- Part three reviews ideological transmission in the prison estate, looking at theoretical perspectives on prison as a 'total institution', and prisoners as agents in the transmission process. Religion and religious conversion in prisons are discussed. The evidence on radicalisation and the transmission of extremist ideologies in prisons is assessed.

PEER TRANSMISSION AND INFLUENCE

Individuals tend to form relationships with others similar to themselves (*homophily*). This is the result of two processes: selection and socialisation.

Selection effects can be explained in part by the ease and certainty which people similar to ourselves can offer.

External factors may also influence the available pool of friends.

Many social science theories predict that, once associated, individuals will come to resemble each other in both thought and behaviour (socialisation effects).

Peer groups have been identified variously as a source of norms for individuals, a source of peer pressure, and sources of identity for individuals.

Where empirical research has been conducted, this has generally found evidence for both selection and socialisation processes.

At the same time, empirical work has struggled to account for differentiation in peer groups e.g., the presence of relatively few best friends, multiple group identities, and changing group trajectories.

Evidence for peer group influence on the political attitudes and affiliation of individuals is modest at best.

From a security perspective, we can expect those with an interest in extreme ideologies both to seek

each other out and to influence those around them, especially in closed groups insulated from wider society.

Peer relationships have been reported as a source of mobilisation and engagement with terrorism in multiple studies.

Equally, peer relationships can be an important source of ideological restraint, for example by providing moderate ideological benchmarks that contrast extreme ideas and cuing activists to rethink their beliefs.

EDUCATION, PEERS AND IDEOLOGICAL TRANSMISSION

Education has been at the centre of debates on the preparation of young people for their roles as citizens in a diverse and global society, and as independent decision-makers and critics.

Schools and universities are institutions in which children and young adults are socialised and exposed through teachers and peers to ideas, values, practices, but also attitudes and influences.

Transmission is both 'vertical' (top-down, from teacher to pupil), and 'horizontal' (between those of a similar age or status).

The educational process has been seen as inviting children and young adults to try out new ideas and be experimental, and to learn about diverse norms, values and practices as well as more established ways of thinking and doing things. Children and young adults are considered to be open and potentially vulnerable to extreme messaging and other influences.

Peers may help protect one another from exposure to undue influence; they may be critical friends, but occasionally they too may be links in a chain of extremist transmission.

'Learning' encourages student agency; school and university learning environments extend beyond

the teacher-pupil relationship and the classroom to peer-to-peer relationships and informal times and places such as breaks and the playground, after-school clubs, cafeterias and the student union.

The process of citizen formation takes place among peers, in an intra-generational process, as well as between teachers and pupils.

Schools, citizenship, religion and counter-terrorism

The school environment has been seen by some educationalists as a dry run for participation in the more complex political life that follows, and by others as an arena for establishing political competencies. Critics have questioned the effectiveness of citizenship education, and asked what kinds of citizens it is geared to producing.

Britain saw a shift in the first half of the 20th century from religious instruction to religious education. In national guidance, RE has been understood to have several purposes: to provoke challenging questions; to encourage pupils to explore their own beliefs; to enable them to build their sense of identity and belonging; to develop respect for others; and to prompt pupils to consider their responsibilities.

Research has examined how young people learn about religion and make it meaningful through their own and others' experiences and through everyday dialogue with one another. Even young children have been shown to be active communicators and learners when it comes to their own and others' religious identities, beliefs and practices.

Religious schools are held to contribute to the continuation and renewal of faith-based identities, but critics have argued that they are divisive, exclusive and potentially disruptive of critical thinking. However, other scholars argue that *all* schools – irrespective of whether they are faith-based or secular in orientation – can be a medium for the transmission of ideological positions.

Issues of power and agency in education have been a matter of critical concern among scholars, with teachers, the education system, governments and nation states seen variously as protecting the status quo, controlling the ideological tenor of the curriculum, legitimizing knowledge, conducting events in the classroom and preventing children from developing into active learning agents.

A key area of critical intervention among scholars of education has been counterterrorism strategies as they impinge on schools, universities and young people. Critics argue that they may stifle debate, target certain groups and risk pathologising dissent at the expense of conformity.

Universities, student societies and extremism

The period now known as 'emerging adulthood' is associated with increasing participation in higher education, delay in marriage and family life, career instability, and the need for ongoing parental support. Researchers have found that, despite continuing engagement with family members, this stage sees a lessening of bonds, more independent decision-making, increased receptivity to new ideas and worldviews, and 'intense identity exploration'.

Evidence suggests that religious identity is greater among university students than those who do not attend, and that university or college offers a protection against losing one's religion.

Nearly a third of those convicted of al-Qaeda related offences have been found to have studied at university or college, and student societies have been judged to be vulnerable to penetration by ideological extremists. However, the link between such institutions and radicalisation has been questioned. Researchers and student organisations have argued that a number of individual cases does not constitute evidence that student societies are seats of radicalisation or extremist networking.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE IDEA, CONTEXT, FRAMING AND REALITIES OF 'SIKH RADICALISATION' IN BRITAIN

Focusing on a hard-line minority, critics have stated, has taken attention away from the vast majority of students who are not drawn to extremism, and to the protective role of student societies in providing places for prayer and socialising, identity exploration, and student activism and charity work.

PRISON, PEERS AND EXTREMISM

Prisons are environments where a high level of control is exercised but prisoners retain some agency and autonomy, often resisting the controls placed upon them.

Debate is ongoing as to the formation of prisoner social relationships: it is not clear how much the external world impacts on prisoner relationships (imported), or how much social relationships are responses to the prison environment (indigenous).

Imprisonment sits alongside other life events such as divorce and the loss of a child in its capacity to disrupt individuals' understandings of their own self-narratives, challenging how they make sense of their past and future.

Through its provision of ideological and emotional support, religion can be an important coping mechanism for prisoners faced with deprivation. It can have intrinsic functions, focused on self-improvement, personal transformation and inner peace, or extrinsic ones, for example, by enabling solidarity with other prisoners or producing better treatment from staff.

Religion, in this case Islam, provides protective factors which help prisoners face their fears and come to terms with their new environment. It can also play a role in desistance from crime and rehabilitation.

A radical dualist (us v. them) mentality has been witnessed in *both* inmates and prison staff, and attributed to the prison environment rather than radicalisation by extremist individuals or literature.

The difficulty for prison authorities in distinguishing the dangerous from the pious, the potentially violent ideological extremist from the convert to Salafi Islam, has been acknowledged.

There is evidence of both prisoner vulnerability and peer pressure to convert for individual or group benefits, but these need to be distinguished from radicalisation into violent extremism. Conversion more often results from personal motivation and need than from pressure from others.

The convergence of religious and gang identities in prison has been highlighted, calling into question the extent to which radicalisation is the appropriate framework for the analysis of prisoner behaviours.

Existing prison cultures have been identified as a potential check on the growth of extremism within the prison estate. Where terrorist prisoners are the minority, they will be forced to work within and adapt established prison cultures rather than simply expand their own support bases.

Prison overcrowding, the lack of staff resources, and shortage of rehabilitation programmes are mentioned as contributing to the potential growth of extremism in and beyond prison.

Although there is potential in prisons for radicalisation, and prisoners are acknowledged as vulnerable, there is little hard research evidence of widespread prison radicalisation. Claims of prison radicalisation tend instead to come from second-hand accounts.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This report was written by Dr Benjamin Lee and Professor Kim Knott, from Lancaster University, as part of a CREST-funded programme: *Ideas, Beliefs and Values in Social Context*. The full report is available from the CREST website at: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/reports/