CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND
EVIDENCE ON SECURITY THREATS

10 MINUTE READ | GENERAL

HOW AND WHY IDEOLOGIES ARE SHARED AND LEARNED

A guide to understanding ideological transmission and learning, and how the acquisition of extremist ideas is related to broader social and cultural processes.

> **'Ideological transmission and learning' is a normal social and cultural process.**

INTRODUCTION

All people, young and old, are involved in the process of learning and passing on ideas, beliefs, and practices that are important to them. This is how they express their identities and commitments and sustain their worldviews or ideologies.

What we refer to in this guide as 'ideological transmission and learning' is a normal social and cultural process involving parents and children, peer groups, religious and political organisations, online networks, and face-to-face interactions. It takes place in extremist cells, networks and movements, no less than in mainstream settings.

Radicalisation is the most commonly used concept for discussing how extreme ideas and beliefs with the potential to lead to violent behaviour are acquired. It is generally understood to involve the adoption of a new set of beliefs and values, or ideology. Although considerable reliance is placed on this concept by academics and policymakers, it is difficult to apply in practice because both 'radicalisation' and its relationship to ideology remain widely contested.

This guide, therefore, focusses on ideological transmission and learning rather than on radicalisation, and aims to:

- show how the acquisition of extremist ideas is related to broader social and cultural processes
- move away from the content of extremist ideology (what is shared) to how it is expressed and lived
- reconnect ideas and beliefs with violent behaviour by refocusing on the practice of ideology.

It looks at why individuals and groups learn and share ideas, beliefs and practices, and how they go about it.

It then presents a framework for analysing how ideologies are learned and shared, providing a case study of the extreme-right web forum Fascist Forge.

WHY DO INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS LEARN AND SHARE IDEOLOGIES?

Individuals are motivated to learn and adopt particular beliefs, values, and lifestyles for a variety of personal, social, and cultural reasons. These may differ from the reasons and purposes of groups or networks, whose concerns may be focused on recruitment and training, collective action and survival, and getting outsiders to take their worldviews seriously.

DO THESE MOTIVATIONS DIFFER IN THE CONTEXT OF EXTREMISM?

No. While the ideas, beliefs, and intended outcomes of extremists may differ from those of the mainstream (and may, for example, include references to the need and justification for violence), individual and collective motivations in both contexts are likely to be broadly similar.

INDIVIDUAL MOTIVATIONS FOR LEARNING AND SHARING INCLUDE:

- the desire for self-improvement and personal growth (for its own sake or as a basis for action/living)
- the need for people to express their identities and what is important to them (in words, images, practices, dress, material objects, names, and so on)
- the need for people to justify their individual and collective decisions and actions
- the desire of individuals to associate with or belong to a group, and to be befriended and recognised by others
- a commitment to sharing or passing on an ideology to others.

COLLECTIVE MOTIVATIONS INCLUDE:

- the need to share an ideology or worldview – a set of ideas, beliefs, values, and practices – with a wider local, national or global audience, for what is believed to be the greater good of the individual, group, and wider society, now and in the future
- a commitment to sustaining the traditions of the group from one generation to the next through a stock of symbols, memories, and ideas that can be drawn on when needed to explain issues or events, or to bolster collective consciousness
- the requirement to recruit and train individuals able to transmit these traditions, to perform the group's beliefs and rituals, and to be a workforce for those everyday tasks needed to maintain the group and its interests
- the need to respond to innovation and change (practical, ideological, and technological)
- the need to resource and prepare members to carry out activities and debate with opponents in order to achieve objectives.

HOW ARE IDEOLOGIES SHARED AND LEARNED?

How do people come into contact with and then adopt new ideas, values, and practices, including those associated with extremist ideologies?

To help answer this question, we can draw on research which suggests that learning and sharing take place in 'communities of practice'.

This concept was developed in the early 1990s by two educationalists, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, as part of their work on 'situated learning'. They held that people learn through participation in different social settings, such as workplaces, clubs and peer groups.

As apprentices, they learn by being embedded in these settings, by copying and following those with more proficiency and experience, and by picking up the lingo and know-how.

The idea of communities of practice has been used by Karsten Hundeide, John Horgan, and Michael Kenney to understand how learning takes place in extremist political and religious groups.

'Ideological transmission' and 'extremist learning' are interlinked. Transmission is the process of imparting and passing on that which is held to be important (culture, traditions, ideology); learning is the process by which individuals receive and internalise this material.

Ideological transmission and learning, not least of all in extremist settings, involves far more than the acquisition of ideas. It also involves experimenting with a new identity and worldview, trying out new ideas and putting them into practice, and embodying them through the use of symbols, dress, rituals, and a new code of conduct. It is a social process:

- By imitation and shadowing, neophytes learn from those with more authority and experience
- Because it is about learning 'to walk the walk' as well as 'talk the talk', it is practical and expressive as well as conceptual
- 'Learning by doing' benefits from repeated practice, critical feedback, and encouragement from others
- It involves persuasion and influence
- It takes place within families (intergenerational), between peers (intra-generational), within organised groups, and in informal networks and milieus
- It takes place across time and space, both offline and online.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING HOW IDEOLOGIES ARE SHARED AND LEARNED

Why? Why do individuals, groups, or networks value and share ideologies? [Purposive dimension]

What? What ideas, beliefs, norms, and values are transmitted and learned, and in what forms? [Substantive dimension]

How? How do individuals, groups, and networks share ideas and beliefs? What techniques and practices are used in the learning process? [Practical dimension]

Who? Who is involved? What are their roles and relationships? [Social dimension]

Where? (a) Where does ideological learning take place? (b) Are particular places/locations of symbolic importance? [Spatial dimension]

When? (a) When does ideological learning take place? (b) Are particular times/dates of symbolic importance? [Temporal dimension]

HOW DOES THE FRAMEWORK HELP?

- It breaks down the complex process of ideological learning and sharing by asking straightforward, familiar questions
- It can be used to analyse different types of material, such as interviews, online comments and posts, or autobiographical writing
- It can help reconnect ideas and behaviour and reveals how individuals and groups practice, express, and live out their ideologies
- It enables comparisons to be made, for example, between different individuals or groups
- Repeated use can reveal ideological change over time
- It can help in the identification of violent beliefs and justifications for violent action – both necessary if actors are to become successful perpetrators
- It may help in the identification of potential modes of attack, targets, and venues.

ADDITIONALLY, IT CAN BE USEFUL TO SECURITY PRACTITIONERS

- For understanding key influences, sites, and activities
- For the clear communication of problems in open statements
- As a potential tool for tailoring interventions
- For evaluation, particularly for measuring changes over time
- Using the framework in research on extremism, terrorism, and violence

Question	Things to consider
Why? Reasons and motivations	Personal formation; lifelong learning? Recruitment? Group cohesion? Intergenerational transmission? Peer sharing? Informing outsiders? Ideological justification for actions? Rationale for decision-making
What is transmitted and learned?	A political ideology, theology, or worldview? A set of practices/teachings? Norms and values? Ideological content (which ideas, beliefs, values, or symbols are shared and learned)? How is this content packaged (e.g. books, videos, sermons, manifestos, a curriculum, sacred text, propaganda, artefacts, music, ritual)?
How? Techniques and practices	What is the nature of the process: in/formal; explicit/tacit; didactic or self-learning? Mode of delivery (e.g. textual, visual, face-to-face, online)? Pedagogical approach and method (e.g. workshop, masterclass, forum, tutorial, online lectures)? Does it involve bodily practices?
Who is involved in the process?	Who is involved? What are their roles and relationships (e.g. teacher/pupil; charismatic leader/follower; influencer; family member; peers; role model/apprentice)? What social issues are in evidence (e.g. hierarchy, power, agency, autonomy, criticism, discipline)?
Where does it take place?	Where does it happen? Geographical location; venue (e.g. home, school/college, religious institution, place of worship, online)? Open/closed spaces? Significant/symbolic locations?
When does it take place?	Developmental/life stage? Regularity/frequency/duration of learning? Significant, symbolic and/or ritual times?

USING THE FRAMEWORK IN RESEARCH ON EXTREMISM, TERRORISM, AND VIOLENCE

Using the framework is unlikely to identify violent actors or predict future terrorist or other violent attacks, but it does help reconnect ideas and behaviour and reveals how individuals and groups seek to practice, express, and live out their ideologies. It offers new perspectives on extremist belief and practice, on how they are transmitted and learned, when and how they change, and the social factors that influence and reinforce them.

Contemporary manifestations of violent extremism, which take place fully or partially online, generate and shape violent actors without necessarily directing them. In this context, the purpose of ideological learning lies in justifying the need for violent action and then shaping the mode and target.

The process is also retrospective, with successful attacks providing new learning opportunities. It is practical (this is what works), but it's also ideological (this is what's needed) and social (my peers will approve). Violent beliefs can prepare the ground for violent action, and both must be learned if actors are to become successful perpetrators. We can see aspects of this process at work in the following case study of Fascist Forge, an extreme-right web forum.

FASCIST FORGE: A CASE STUDY

Fascist Forge was established in the spring of 2018. It went offline in November 2019 and has not been available since.

Ideologically, Fascist Forge was designed as a successor to the infamous extreme-right forum Iron March and shared many of the same ideological influences alongside a strong esoteric dimension. Users of the site were highly militant and the ideological positions they held were often complex and obscure. The site was explicitly designed as a platform for learning, with sections dedicated to reading lists and other material. Users were encouraged to post introductions explaining their motivations for joining the site and to sit an exam designed to test their ideological knowledge.

Using Fascist Forge as a case study for how to apply the framework is necessarily limited by the nature of the data that was available at the time. The personal introductions posted by users and the readings made available provide information on users' motivations (Why), learning journeys (How), and what they thought and believed (What).

Social information was also available, on personal identities, the roles and reputations of leaders and members, and their online interactions (Who). But there was less detail on times and places (Where and When). Users were free to choose what and how much to say about themselves, but given that extremist movements and settings are often clandestine, the reticence about what information was posted is not surprising.

WHY

Users offered a range of motivations for wanting to learn more about fascism, often framing learning as a form of self-improvement or desire for more involvement in the extreme-right.

WHAT

There was a great deal of ideological content available on Fascist Forge including reading lists of key texts, such as 'Siege' by James Mason. Learning went beyond ideological texts, however, with the site providing users with examples of how fascists were expected to conduct themselves online in the form of key aesthetic values (e.g. online avatars, post signatures, usernames) and behaviours (e.g. how to interact with others, including outsiders).

HOW

The mechanics of learning were superficially formal with users often advised to read texts and knowledge subsequently tested in both online discussion and a formal exam. However, there was also evidence of social learning. New users were harassed and interrogated about their reasons for joining the site as well as being criticised for making ideological missteps. Established users were able to act as exemplars for new members. Likewise, failed members, who were often removed from the site, provided models of what not to say or do.

WHO

Fascist Forge represented an online 'community of practice'. It was a close-knit community with a small group of high-status and skilled practitioners at its heart. Despite presenting itself as an open forum in which anyone with the right knowledge could participate, access was closely controlled by the core group. Users identified almost exclusively as male and white. Becoming a high-status user was dependent on gaining the acceptance of the core group which was overtly hostile to newcomers.

WHERE

Users hailed from a variety of locations, though the majority were from English-speaking countries. Prior learning and experience of far-right extremism may have been shaped by local circumstances, but the learning on offer on Fascist Forge was delivered online, irrespective of the location of users.

WHEN

Users recounted earlier extremist learning, often linked to their autobiographical timeline. Learning on Fascist Forge was asynchronous.

Despite presenting itself as a forum in which individual learning was encouraged, analysis of Fascist Forge showed the importance of social learning. Abstract ideological knowledge was important, but partly because it was a tool to demonstrate belonging and to gain acceptance from established members of the community.

The hostile tone and aggression towards newcomers were designed to test commitment and authenticity and to weed out unsuitable members. This was in stark contrast to the more supportive and nurturing models of learning identified in some other extremist settings and may go some way to explaining why the forum failed to recapture the relevance of Iron March.

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