EX POST PAPER
Lessons from adjacent fields: cults

Summary

How can those working in a rather small and complex field like exit work improve their methods and programmes? Learning from professionals and organisations who are working on similar processes is one option. Helping individuals to leave cults has a comparatively long history. Some of the first exit programmes for extremism, put in place in Europe at the end of the 1990s, were based on experiences with cults. Since then, new insights into have been gained into how to work with people leaving cults or leaving an extremist environment, creating opportunities for new cross-fertilisation.

The recommendations and information in this paper are based on presentations and discussions during the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) EXIT meeting of 27 and 28 June 2017. This document is intended for exit organisations in the field of violent extremism as well as cults. Other actors in the field of countering violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) may also benefit.

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Introduction

Exit work helping people leave an extremist movement, stop their use of violence and change their opinions has only emerged fairly recently as a field of work. Programmes first came into existence in the Western world at the end of the last century. The number of radicalised persons as such is rather limited in size and heterogenous when it comes to kind of extremist ideology, background and motivations that make them to leave the radical environment in the end. The approach adopted by the various existing exit programmes differs. Some tend to put more emphasis on behavioural aspects (disengagement), others on the ideology (deradicalisation). Some programmes are based on therapeutic psychologic insights, others on youth-work methods. There are no standards in exit work when it comes to assessment, treatment and registering casesThis range of methodologies and the limited number of cases make it interesting to look at adjacent fields.

One field that is similar in terms of the process of leaving a group observed is that of cults or sects. Here, there is a longer tradition of trying to help people get out, as well as a longer history of academic research on both the cultic environment and leaving mechanisms. When scholar Tore Bjørgo designed one of the first European exit programmes (in Norway, later implemented in Sweden and Germany), he found his inspiration in Cultic Studies.

Providing a platform for an exchange of views on what exit work can learn from cults – and vice versa – the RAN EXIT working group organised a meeting in close cooperation with the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA). It took place on 27-28 June in Bordeaux, France.

To a certain extent, it is difficult to distinguish between cults and extremist or radical groups Some cults do commit violent acts that can be considered as disruptive for society, like the sarin attack on a Tokyo metro station in 1995 by members of the cult movement Aum Shinrikyo.

Like cults, many extremist or radical groups also have strong internal control mechanisms, create psychological changes in their members (such as a dependence and a strong degree of identification) and have a 'guru' personality as leader, just like the invisible but always present figure of Al-Baghdadi in Daesh. So there is no clear-cut line between the two, and there is rather a continuum on which groups can be placed. For both cults and extremist or radical groups, the groups concerned will sometimes categorise themselves in that way, but most are more likely to reject the label they are given by the outside world as either prejudiced or pejorative.

Bringing two fields together also implies bringing together two vocabularies, both of which have their own rich history of debate when it comes to definitions. To leapfrog this and keep the paper understandable, we note the differing history of work on 'cults' and 'recovery' (leaving it) and 'extremist groups' and 'exit' (leaving it), whilst also noting the overlaps between the two, including with definitions[1].

This paper zooms in on the similarities and differences in terms of leaving cultic and radical groups. Before concentrating on exit work / recovery, this paper will first look at the group mechanisms that are typical for both extremist groups and cults, and the variations that can be found here. In the final section, challenges and opportunities for further cross fertilisation will be explored.

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[1] See appendix.

The manipulative group

Both cults and extremist groups use tactics to attract and retain members in a manipulative way. In general, people are gradually pushed in one direction. Once they are lured in, stepping back seems difficult or is made impossible. This section deals with how this group manipulation functions. As there is a huge variety of cults and extremist groups, not all mechanisms are used by all groups with the same intensity at the same time.

Recruitment of members

One of the recruitment techniques which applied, is de-individuation strategies. Members of the group are given bound choices, and violation of the boundaries is unacceptable. Several forms of violence may be present: sexual, physical, psychological, spiritual, educational, financial, social and family related. There is a moral re-orientation and a demonisation of the 'others' (creating an 'us and them' thinking pattern)[2].

To keep order within the group, intra-group surveillance techniques are used. Members spy on each other and internal court systems are not unknown. Punishment can result from this court system, or be part of the set of rules within the group. People are restricted in their behaviour in order not to trigger safety hazards for the group[3].

However, it is important to underline that not all people are equally susceptible to manipulation and strategic recruitment. Personal ties like friendship networks can play a role, as can psychological vulnerability (although overall psychopathology is no more prevalent among cult members than in society as a whole[4]). Finally, it is of course possible that persons join of free will[5]. It is therefore a kaleidoscope of both pull- and push factors that can drive an individual towards such a group. Second generation members – those who become members by birth – are however a special category. They grow up with the idea that the group is normal as this is where they receive their education and socialisation.

These similar recruitment mechanisms as well as the psychological changes among members of both cults and extremist groups are shared by a large variety of groups labelled as either cults or radical groups. There are however huge differences when it comes to:

- World view / ideology
- Acceptance of common societal values
- Acceptance of laws
- Cult of leadership
- Internal violent behaviour or intentions, both physical and mental
- External violent behaviour or intentions towards society or a specific group

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[2] Stephen A. Kent, presentation 'Possible sociological and cultic studies contributions to radicalisation awareness' 27 June 2017.
[3] Ibidem.
[4] Dr. Linda Dubrow-Marshall, presentation 'Recovery and Counselling. Lessons from adjacent fields: Cults' 28 June
[5] Kropfeld and Langone, presentation 'Recruiting and Retaining Cult Members', 27 June 2017.

Different 'scores' on these points help to make the distinction between organisations and followers that range from rather innocent to a clear and present danger.

The way in which a cultic or radical group functions evolves over time. Groups also can split up into more or less dogmatic / radical factions.

Retaining members

Margaret Singer describes six ways in which cults can use thought-reform processes to influence and control members[6]. Cults and extremists can use these processes to exercise extraordinary control over members' lives, although not all groups necessarily do so.

1. Keep the person unaware of what is going on and how she or he is being changed one step at a time. Potential new members are led, step-by-step, through a behavioural-change programme, without being aware of the final agenda or full content of the group. The goal may be to make them deployable agents for the leadership, to get them to buy more courses, or get them to make a deeper commitment, depending on the leader's aim and desires.

2. Control the person's social and / or physical environment; especially control the person's time. Through various methods, newer members are kept busy and led to think about the group and its content during as much of their waking time as possible.

3. Systematically create a sense of powerlessness in the person. This is accomplished by removing members from their normal social support group for a period of time, and instead putting them in an environment where the majority of people are already group members. The members serve as models for the attitudes and behaviours of the group, and speak an in-group language.

4. Manipulate a system of rewards, punishments and experiences in such a way as to inhibit behaviour that reflects the person's former social identity. Manipulation of experiences can be accomplished through various methods of trance induction, including leaders using such techniques as paced speaking patterns, guided imagery, chanting, long prayer sessions or lectures, and lengthy meditation sessions.

5. Manipulate a system of rewards, punishments, and experiences in order to promote learning the group's ideology or belief system and group-approved behaviours. Good behaviour, demonstrating an understanding and acceptance of the group's beliefs, and compliance, are rewarded while questioning, expressing doubts or criticising are met with disapproval, redress and possible rejection. If someone expresses a question, he or she is made to feel that there is something inherently wrong with them for questioning.

6. Put forth a closed system of logic and an authoritarian structure that permits no feedback and cannot be modified except by leadership approval or executive order. The group has a top-down, pyramid structure. The leaders must have verbal ways of never losing. (Singer, 1995)

The ultimate result in conversion is when the person internalises the ideology and values of the group. *He or she becomes a deployable agent.* This conversion process is also described in 'Totalistic Identity Theory'

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[6] Margaret Singer 'Cult Mind Control & Thought Reform: Six Conditions For Thought Reform' (1995)http://www.refocus.org/uploads/3/9/3/8/3938709/singers_conditions.pdf

(Dubrow-Marshall 2010); self-identification with the group becomes totally dominant and supresses other aspects of a person's identity. Totalistic Identity Theory is based on research which found evidence of links between a form of group-based psychopathology and the extent of identification with a group. The theory also explains how group-based actions, including violent actions, can be self-referential and reinforcing of the dominant part of the person's self-identity, which is group related.

Leaving an extremist group or a cult

There are two ways to leave an extremist group or cult: voluntarily or by force. Voluntary withdrawal can happen if the member feels that inconsistencies in ideology and group behaviour become unbearable. RAN EXIT deems that a seed of doubt about the group or ideology is a necessity for successful exit intervention: "*There is a difference between someone needing help and someone being ready for help. You cannot force an exit intervention on someone who is not open to it"*.[7]. The other way of exiting an extremist group or cult is by force: being kicked out by the group, being pulled out by family members or being imprisoned by the state. But while a person may be pushed or pulled out of the direct influence of a group, this does not necessarily mean they renounce its ideology or behaviour.

Both individuals that leave voluntary and those that are forced to leave have to deal with many challenges before successful resocialisation into mainstream society is possible.

Challenges after leaving a group

Individuals that have left a cult or extremist group are first confronted with some primary survival concerns[8]. Outside of the group, they have little or no access to key resources such as money and housing. Individuals that have been in the group for a long period will have little or no connections left in mainstream society; their entire network and identity is manifested in the group. Survival thus becomes the first priority. People that have left the group may experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)[9] (see text box 1). Second generation members being pulled out of cults may not feel that they have been rescued at all. They have had to leave all they have ever known.

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[7] EX POST RAN EXIT 'Setting up an exit intervention' Berlin, 13-14 February 2017 https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-exit/docs/ran_exit_setting_up_exit_intervention_berlin_13-14_022017_en.pdf
[8]Ashley Allen, ICSA. Presentation 'Working With First and Second Generation Former Members' 27 June 2017
[9] Linda Dubrow-Marshall, RETIRN UK and ICSA. Presentation 'Recovery and counselling' 28 June 2017

Former members may also be confronted with a lack of 'common knowledge'. This is especially true for second generation members:

"I remember being in school and my classmates were talking about Michael Jordan. I asked them who Michael Jordan was. Somewhat surprised they told me that he was the most famous basketballer in the world. I asked them what basketball was. From that point I was known as the freaky kid." Ashley Allen, ICSA.

It is not uncommon for the individuals who left voluntarily to feel guilty and think about returning. Diffulties after leaving can feel like proof that they are unfit for life in mainstream society. Active harassment from the group to pull the individual back in can amplify these feelings. On the other hand,

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Post-traumatic stress disorder

Individuals leaving a cult or extremist group can suffer from PTSD. This will directly influence their capacity to disengage from the group and resocialise in general society. PTSD starts with depression, leading to anxiety and ultimately to the individual feeling dissociated. Individuals with PTSD may suffer from the following symptoms:

- **Re-experiencing symptoms:** flashbacks, bad dreams, frightening thoughts.
- **Avoidance symptoms**: staying away from places, events or objects that are reminders of the traumatic experience. Avoiding thoughts and feelings that remind him or her of the trauma.
- **Arousal & Reactivity Symptoms:** easily startled, on-edge, sleep deprivation, angry outbursts.
- **Cognition Symptoms:** trouble remembering key features of the trauma. Negative thoughts about oneself or the world. Guilt, blame, other distorted feelings. Loss of interest in enjoyable activities.

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people who have chosen to leave can feel ashamed and angry, realising that they had been deceived by the group.

Resocialisation and exit work

The main challenge for resocialisation is overcoming the identity crisis that individuals are likely to experience. The deconstruction of individuality has left the identity of the person completely intertwined with the cult or extremist group. The loss of the entire social network, surroundings, activities will leave someone with the question: 'who am I?'. To completely deconstruct the extremist or cultic identity, it is crucial to replace it with a new one[10]. Although many are able to do so without help from others, exit work can play an important role.

For exit work, the above-mentioned challenge means that the first steps in helping the individual with disengagement and resocialisation will revolve around practical matters such as housing and income. A new job and environment may help the individual to construct a new social network and identity. Meanwhile the individual's disengagements process can benefit from counselling. The most important lesson for counselling is that it has to be tailored and paced. The counsellor should not be hasty or act as if they know the client's situation. On top of the practical issues mentioned previously, counselling can address the following issues[11]:

- helping clients to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty;
- providing space to express a full range of emotions, including existential angst, anger and grief;
- returning to critical thinking and ability to make decisions;

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[10] André Taubert, Legato Hamburg 'RAN EXIT 'Lesson from adjacent fields: Cults'
[11] Linda Dubrow-Marshall, RETIRN UK and ICSA. Presntation 'Recovery and counselling' 28 June 2017

- finding a balance between giving people choices and overwhelming them with choices;
- kick-starting stalled developmental issues;
- repairing relationships with family members and friends;
- forming new relationships;
- dealing with emotional issues – returning to conflicts that existed pre-group involvement and which may have increased vulnerability to the cult;

Not all issues should be addressed directly and simultaneously. If a client suffers from PTSD (see textbox, page 5), PTSD recovery should be the primary concern. Judith Herman distinguishes between three stages of recovery that can guide the counselling process:

1. Safety, self-care, healthy regulation of emotions
2. Remembrance and mourning
3. Reconnection with people, meaningful activities, other aspects of life.

True disengagement and resocialisation may take many years. But exit work is not necessarily exclusively executed by professionals. Family, new friends (not attached to the cult or the extremist (anymore)) and other important third persons can also play an important role.

The role of families

Families can play a major role in preventing a family member from joining a cult or extremist group, as well as helping them to leave. Of course there are cases in which the family or certain family members have a negative influence. RAN recognises the importance of family, and has published several papers outlining lessons on family support, for both prevention and disengagement from violent extremism[12][13].

Families are the first to recognise an individual's change in behaviour, feeling a lack of contact. Growing concerns and disagreement with the ideology of the movement / cult can leave family members confused: their loved one is 'brainwashed'. Families often tend to wait, hoping the person will change his or her mind or will look for professional help him/herself and / or focusing on persuading him / her to leave. This can end up in conflict or (temporary) loss of contact[14].

Support programmes for families like Intervention101 for cults and Hayat (German programme supporting mothers whose children have joined Daesh) for extremist groups work with the philosophy that retaining the relationship is more important than fighting the cult or extremist group. A good relationship is important in itself however, also provides the only opportunity to influence somebody, however insignificant this might appear at certain moments. Fighting the group will cause loyalty issues and bias the relationship. Not fighting the ideology / religion / goals of the group does not imply your approval. The

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[12] EX POST PAPER RAN YF&C Family support: what works? Manchester, 29-30 September https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_ex-post_paper_family_support_29-30_september_manchester_en.pdf

[13] EX POST PAPER RAN YF&C and RAN H&SC 'Working with families and safeguarding children from radicalisation' Nice, 02-03 February 2017 https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-h-and-sc/docs/ran_yf-c_h-sc_working_with_families_safeguarding_children_en.pdf

[14] Joseph Kelly & Patrick Ryan, Intervention 101. Presentation 'Exit work with families and current members' 27 June 2017

person in the cult or extremist group should have the feeling that returning to his or her family is always an option.

Counselling issues for families confronted by members joining extremist groups or cults[15]
- Psycho-education about the effect of high-pressure groups and group influence
- Soothing of anger through understanding
- Learning communication skills
- Examination of family issues – unification around concerns for family member
- Planned action rather than impulsive outbursts
- Encouragement of patience, small steps toward family conciliation

Challenges and ways for further cross-fertilisation

Challenges

Both exit work on cults and extremism face challenges when it comes to legitimising their work to the general public or policy-makers. As samples are small, few standardised methods exist, and the number of evidence-based interventions is limited, both have problems proving their added value. The legitimation challenge takes different forms. For non-violent cults, the belief that (former) members pose no great harm to society as a whole has posed challenges in terms of accessing government funding. For extremism, more resources are available, but expectations are also high due to the perceived threat to society, especially when it comes to returning foreign terrorist fighters.

Both forms of exit work also have a few unpopular messages to tell: compulsory treatment without any intrinsic motivation is most likely to fail; treatment takes time; there are multiple pathways for leaving a group, largely depending on circumstances and biographical elements.

A specific challenge is working with the second generation – those who only know the cult or extremist milieu. Recovery work with individuals from this group has been taking place for some time. For violent extremism, the phenomenon is quite new (e.g. children returning from the caliphate or being raised in a 'völkische Siedlung'). For children of extremists, the challenge can be amplified if parents or other family members are prosecuted and imprisoned.

Ways for further cross-fertilisation

Cults and extremist groups function on one continuum, which make a clear-cut difference between them impossible, inaccurate and unhelpful. Some groups exhibit clear characteristics of both, for example the place of the apocalypse in Daesh ideology and the role of invisible leader Al-Baghdadi have could be considered rather cultic. In other words, there are cults that commit acts of violent extremism and which are considered terrorist groups (e.g. Daesh or Aum Shinrikyo). Meanwhile differences also remain concerning 1) perception of societal danger and 2) legitimisation of violence.

There are similarities when it comes to 1) vulnerable target groups who are lured into a unit, 2) manipulative strategies for recruitment and retention of members and psychological changes, and 3) guiding principles on how to work as professionals and families to help individuals leave the group / movement and return to mainstream society. Further cooperation between experts on leaving cultic and extremist groups in general or more specific between RAN and ICSA, could be fruitful in supporting the individuals affected by improving programmes, methods and activities.

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[15] Linda Dubrow-Marshall, RETIRN UK and ICSA. Presentation 'Recovery and counselling' 28 June 2017

Looking at the similarities, an exchange of case studies to grow the data pool would benefit both cult and extremism exit work. The same applies to exchanges on which methods and tools are effective, including the training of staff in both exit and recovery work. For these efforts to bear fruit, it is key to first bridge the vocabulary divide and to consider developing a common terminology that applies to these overlapping fields.

Finally, further exchange on involving formers – who are active in both fields – could be beneficial. Some formers from non-violent cults are already working with former extremists, indicating the importance of further work to establish when the role of formers has the most added value alongside other roles (such as that of mental health professionals, who have been active for many years in exit and recovery work).

Appendix 1 - Definitions concerning cults and radical or extremist groups - clarifying overlapping terms

Across related and overlapping fields of practice and inquiry concerning cults, radical and extremist groups and violent extremism there are multiple terms which have been variously defined at different stages of history and through different forms of practical intervention and research.

The term '*cult*'[16] is widely acknowledged as an imperfect term with a degree of ambiguity and associations with media stereotypes that are sometimes unhelpful. For example, the word 'cult' often conjures up the notion of a religious group such as those that proliferated in the 1960s and often originated in the US. The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) does not use the term 'cult' to label particular groups but instead sees cult like practice or cultic influence on a continuum of 'undue influence' and draws on research which has defined key psychological aspects of coercive persuasion and control and 'thought reform' (as in Robert J Lifton's seminal work). The focus for ICSA is on the group modus operandi and practice and on the psychological changes in cults and extremist groups (as in the 'totalistic identity theory') which allows the term 'cult' to be applied to a wide range of groups some of which are religious, political, psychotherapeutic, business and terrorist in their nature and activity and sometimes involve a combination of these features.

Related common terms such as '*radical groups*' or '*extremist groups*' can also be applied widely to a range of similar phenomena and thus it can be demonstrated that terrorist groups and violent extremism are a sub-set of a wider set of groups which may be variously termed as cults, radical or extremist groups. The extent of cultic or undue influence or thought reform may vary considerably between groups, including those that are violent extremist groups. It follows that the extent of thought reform, analogous to a 'totalistic identity' and to the process of psychological conversion, will also vary between groups and importantly within groups. Just as the extent of violence will vary between groups (from none through to a modus operandi based entirely around acts of terrorist violence) so too will the extent of abuse within a group and the extent of harm suffered by members. The phrase coined by Michael Langone (Executive Director of ICSA) in 2005 speaks to the importance of a balanced and empirical approach to research and practice in this area when he says that "some groups under some circumstances harm some people".

Definitions of '*violent extremism*' and '*terrorism*' can therefore be seen to describe the features of particular phenomena which overlap in important ways with a wider range of phenomena referred to as cults, radical or extremist groups. The European Commission defined 'violent radicalisation' as "the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism as defined in Article 1 of the Framework Decision on Combatting Terrorism". It is clear that such a definition is also encapsulated within the wider definition of cults which was established in 1985 by ICSA "as a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control (e.g., isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressures, information management, suspension of individuality or critical judgment, promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it…), designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community." Clarifying the meaning and application of these overlapping terms is therefore helpful as practitioners across related fields of practice collaborate to enhance understandings and the efficacy of interventions to counter violent extremism, facilitate exit and foster sustainable recovery for former members.

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[16] The term 'sect' is often used instead of 'cult' in Europe outside of English speaking countries.