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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Youth & Education

4-5 June 2020

Digital meeting

Transgenerational Transmission of Extremist Ideologies – learning from adjacent fields: Cults and Gangs

Summary

While the process of radicalisation is often described as the act of distancing from mainstream society, radicalisation can also occur in cases where parents pass on their extremist beliefs to their children. The aim of the RAN Youth & Education digital meeting, held on 4–5 June 2020, was to obtain further insight into the process of transgenerational transmission of extremist ideology and approaches to safeguarding children from such radicalisation by their own families and communities, by learning from practitioners working in adjacent fields, such as cults and gangs.

This paper summarises daily practices and recommendations for teachers and youth workers, active in the field of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). It shows how to implement best practices and lessons learned from these adjacent fields when approaching children who are growing up in an extremist environment. Specifically, it shows how best to engage with these children and how to provide them with an alternative non-extremist network in society.

Introduction

The topic of children growing up in extremist families has become more important as European countries repatriate highly traumatised children and families of Daesh militants from Syria and Iraq. However, emotional and physical trauma affects also children who grow up in an extremist family inside the EU (that is, whose parents are involved in extremism and terrorism of different origins). All these children are potentially vulnerable to radicalisation and violent extremism if not properly socialised and (re)integrated into society. They may also suffer from the transgenerational transmission of the trauma of their parents or from their own traumatic experiences. Both represent a significant risk to a child's development and overall functioning and increase the risk of physical and mental health issues in the future that might also lead to radicalisation and extremism.

During the RAN Y&E meeting of 4-5 June 2020, a discussion was held in the different groups of children living in an extremist environment, primarily children from religious or right-wing extremist families, and those growing up in cults or gangs. This Conclusion paper reflects the main outcomes of this meeting. It is focused on understanding the effects of growing up in an extremist setting, using knowledge obtained from adjacent fields, as well as how to improve for youth workers and teachers their approach to deal with at risk or radicalised youth. Finally, this paper summarises proposed key lessons, recommendations and inspiring practices derived from adjacent fields - cults and gangs.

Understanding the effects of growing up in an extremist setting: What can be learnt from adjacent fields – cults and gangs?

There are many similarities in the living conditions and the social environment in which children, whose parents joined violent extremist groups (e.g. Daesh) and those who were member of **cults** or **gangs**, were raised. These conditions include manipulation, indoctrination and control of every aspect of life, as well as strong antagonism towards the outside world, and the creation of animosity in an "us" versus "them" stance to support the idea of separation from the wider society. The main challenges teachers and youth workers addressed at the meeting comprised how to approach children growing up in an extremist family, how to tackle the doubts in the child's mind about the outside world as well as the child's behaviour that might lead to radicalisation and violence in the future, and how to use experience and best practices from adjacent fields.

The experience in working with current or former cult members was shared with the aim to explain how a cult provides its members with an alternative lifestyle, monopolises an individual's life, and uses other manipulative techniques, including limited and strictly controlled education. Presented personal experience of living in the cult named *The Children of God* show how cults manipulate and control their members through the **BITE model**: (1) Behaviour, (2) Information, (3) Thoughts, and (4) Emotions. ⁽¹⁾

It was concluded that the approach and intervention used by practitioners with experience in working with children who grew up in cults and gangs, to safeguard them from indoctrination and radicalisation by their own families and communities, could be easily translated to the daily practice of teachers and youth workers active in the field of P/CVE. It was agreed that the right approach and intervention depend on many factors: whether the child is **at risk** of radicalisation by transgenerational transmission of extremist ideologies or **already radicalised** by these means; the **age** of the child and the **level of trauma**; the level of **cooperation of the family** (cooperation or non-cooperation); and the **capabilities** of teachers and youth workers to provide proper care (available logistics, funds, skills, support from other services, etc.).

¹ A testimony by a former member, Ms Flor Edwards.

How to improve the approaches for youth workers and teachers to deal with at-risk or radicalised youth

From the experience in counselling and supporting youngsters from cults and gangs, the following conditions and key messages should be put in focus of youth workers and teachers when dealing with:

❖ Youth at risk of radicalisation

When working with youth **at risk** of radicalisation, practitioners highlighted that age-related factors play a dominant role: **younger** children have less awareness of life outside the family or movement, while **older** children (teenagers) have a better knowledge of the world outside their group. Another important factor is **when** they joined the group (by being born into it or having joined at a later stage) and how they perceive the world around them. With such age differences, allegiance levels can also appear to be different. With those who started **earlier**, identity is less fully formed and language less loaded; they have no or very limited experience of the outside world; initial grievances may be expressed more honestly; they show less suspicion of teachers, youth and exit workers; and love for parents is either unconditional or absent. For those who started **later** with the process of indoctrination, identity is totally focused on the group. Once the group's ideology is adopted, it serves as a self-protection for an individual with a 'minefield' installed around them to prevent outside influences. Any attempt to question the ideology can therefore trigger defensive mechanisms. They show greater loyalty to the group, show enhanced need to use the language of the ideology and have a greater risk of normative action (violence).

In such cases an **"Experimental Approach"** is highly recommended ⁽²⁾, with the aim of providing experiences about the outside world that could offer opportunities of positive life alternatives, including activities that lead to laughter or that can elicit interests. These experiences could undermine the ideology, should be preferably in line with the person's interests, and could accelerate the process of leaving a cult or extremist movement. The approach is based on different theories such as:

- **A Rational Frame Theory** – a modern behaviour analytic approach to language which aims to better understand the link between human language and behaviour;
- **An ACT – Acceptance and Commitment Therapy** – which helps clients learn to stop avoiding, denying, and struggling with their inner emotions and, instead, accept that these deeper feelings are appropriate responses to certain situations that should not prevent them from moving forward in their lives.

There are a lot of rules, regulations and things that are not allowed to do or experience for cults and extremist movements members. Recommended tools to help them find positive life alternatives are:

- **A backdoor to the outside world – take a person for a walk** in the outside world
 - by reframing activities or reasoning, teachers and youth workers can open a door to the outside world (because the main door is hindered by rules and phobias); provide positive experience, preferably in line with the persons' interests; give experiences that undermine the ideology; reframe forbidden activities into something neutral. Always note: the journey is not the same for everyone.
- **The motivational interviewing approaches** ⁽³⁾
 - use an empathic curiosity to build a relationship of trust and respect with the young person; understanding their personal history is key to avoiding further radicalisation. It is important to be a

² An approach recommended by Harkan Jarva, a psychologist and cult expert from the Swedish NGO *Hjälpkällan*.

³ An approach recommended by Professor Rod Dubrow-Marshall, PhD, MBPsS, who co-founded the Re-Entry Therapy Information and Referral Network (RETIRN) UK in 2004 with Dr Linda Dubrow-Marshall, where he serves as an exit worker and consultant in helping individuals and families who have been affected by radicalisation, extremism or by abusive or high demand groups or relationships.

likeable and positive pole of attraction but also authentic and honest — ‘rolling with the resistance’ but also exploring discrepancies and cognitive dissonance without being judgemental.

- **A model of unethical manipulation** ⁽⁴⁾ - for understanding what happens under the pressure of manipulators/recruiters/leaders who are trying to make a child part of a group
 - this model shows what the pressure does to people who join an extremist setting (what is happening in their mind, what emotional blackmail and abuse of authority they are facing, what brings them into and how they behave in survival mode, what is happening with their identity).

❖ **Already radicalised youth**

Children who are **already highly indoctrinated by radical ideologies** and hate may often be traumatised by horrific experiences and exposure to violence. Some might have been trained to use weapons and might have already committed violent acts. These children may also be highly stressed, more intolerant or violent in their social environment. They may express anger and be verbally aggressive towards teachers and students, and may suffer from severe psychiatric diagnoses, such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They require a more detailed holistic approach and a specially created **child assessment system** and **care plan**.

The presented experiences show that it is not useful to attack the ideology when a person is already radicalised. In such cases it is important to understand the ideology (what is allowed and what is forbidden) and to provide positive experiences of the outside world that undermine the ideology.

Recommended models and tools how to achieve this include:

- **Reframing forbidden activities** into something neutral
 - non-forbidden positive experiences are presented as very effective
- **Building up a new identity**
 - to step away from a certain violent ideology (this may include friends, family and a part of their identity)
- **Building alternative relationships**
 - to help children to get acquainted with other values and behaviour (this can include wider family members but also natural stakeholders such as sports coaches and personal mentors).

“ACT – LIVING LIFE FULLY” – a contextual behavioural approach applied in juvenile detention centers aimed at helping juvenile offenders to change their lives. Read more about it [here](#).

Key lessons

- ❖ Be **culturally sensitive** to the child’s background and stay neutral (blaming the parents will not help either); try to expand **counselling** from individual to family counselling.
- ❖ **Continuity of care** is crucial in building resilience in these children, as well as **constant evaluation** of the effectiveness of the implemented measures.
- ❖ **Be supportive**; share insights; be truthful/empathise; relieve from shame; build a trustful relationship; create an environment of critical thinking (build schools as **laboratories for democracy**).

⁴ A tool recommended by Frances Peters, FreeChoice Counselling (NL).

- ❖ **Find the need or needs that could be exploited by recruiters** and try to address these needs; open the doors to the society: peer-to-peer mentoring might be the most effective in a pre-radicalisation stage.
- ❖ **Don't:** add pressure; expect too much; preach; hurry; create false positive or false negative, focus only on curriculum issues (explore the living environment and clarify the situation at home).

Recommendations

- **Guidelines and protocols for practitioners on how to deal with children raised in extremist environments and suffering from trauma and other mental health issues are not available in all countries/regions; these also require constant evaluation and updating;**
- **Support from other professionals - a pedagogical coalition of educators, care professionals and parents** is highly recommended (including appropriate support system in schools, multi-agency work and holistic approach in providing appropriate care and intervention), additional training as well as networking with other professionals, to ensure improving knowledge on effective tools to tackle trauma and radicalisation;
- Adjustment of **school curricula** – to enable educators to get a better insight into the background and family;
- Additional research on the **effects** of growing up in extremist families on children and on their potential radicalisation;
- **Comparison** and **evaluation** of different tools and methods used in working with such children in different countries/regions;
- Evaluation of **risk assessment** tools tailored to children of different age.

Inspiring practices

- ❖ **Belgium - CAPREV (Center for Assistance and Support for People Affected by Violent Radicalism and Extremism)** – A multidisciplinary team that works with minors and adults (on a voluntary basis) on building a bond of trust, confidentiality and disengagement from violence (<https://extremismes-violents.cfwb.be/>).

Recommended tool

ALBUM – a tool to work on transgenerational transmission between a parent and a child (still in the test phase): this is being used for talking about secrets, unspoken experiences and misunderstandings; within the same family; historicity work; aimed at social workers; production of supports expressed by artistic means; telling stories without violence.

- ❖ **Netherlands – FreeChoice Counselling** - FreeChoice provides information and support to people from coercive group cultures or relationships, highly controlled (religious) environments, new religious movements, sects, High Control Groups (HCG), radicalized or extremist groups. It offers coaching and counselling for people who have grown up in these environments and want support in the search for their own identity. It also offers presentations that can raise awareness of the harmful effects of emotional manipulation techniques and mental abuse among the aforementioned groups, (sub) cultures and relationships (<https://recovery-freechoice.com>).
- ❖ **Spain - ARMI (Community of Madrid's Agency for the Re-education and Re-integration of Young Offenders)** – An autonomous administrative body responsible for the execution of the measures adopted by the judicial bodies in application of the legislation on criminal responsibility of minors. Its basic objective is to concentrate, develop

and implement programmes and actions that contribute to the aims of reintegration and education of the minor offenders (<https://www.comunidad.madrid/servicios/justicia/menores-infractores>).

- ❖ **Spain – SUYAE ASSOCIATION** – a non-profit organisation working with street gangs is created by a group of professionals in mediation, integration, education and social work who are dedicated to receiving, accompanying and guiding children and young people in situations of vulnerability, exclusion and social conflict in order to improve their social integration (www.suyae.org).
- ❖ **UK / ICSA (International Cultic Studies Association) - RETIRN (Re-Entry Therapy Information and Referral Network)** – The RETIRN model consists of the following elements: **Re-Entry** (back to family, friends, work, community from extremist groups of all kinds); **Therapy** (need for professional ongoing help); **Information** (the importance of education, including self-education to foster independence and growth); **Referral Network** (working with other professionals and people in the wider community to provide tailored support and care) (<https://drsteveeichel.com/retirn>).

Recommended reading

1. Edwards, F. (2018). *Apocalypse Child: A Life in End Times*. Turner Publishing Company (⁵)
2. Herman, J. (2015). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence - From domestic abuse to political terror*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
3. LaFree, G. (2019). *A comparative study of violent extremism and gangs*. University of Maryland (⁶)
4. Livheim, F. (2019). [ACT Treatment for Youth – A Contextual Behavioral Approach](#). Thesis for doctoral degree (Ph.D.), Department of Clinical Neuroscience, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden.

⁵ A read for those interested in cult life. It describes how authoritarianism, in particular religious cults, seeps slowly and insidiously into the psyche until one doesn't know what is normal and what is not - it provides a better understanding of this type of psychological abuse.

⁶ This research explores similarities and differences between violent extremism and street gangs. It proves that a certain percentage of extremist have a history of gang involvement.