

What is harmful about radicalisation?

The need for a concept of Cultic Abuse

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Introduction

The collapse of the ISIS 'caliphate' has given fresh urgency to the question of how ISIS fighters and other affiliates who travelled to ISIS territory should be dealt with should they attempt to return to their countries of origin. Among the more difficult and controversial of these are cases of ISIS affiliates who were recruited as minors, many of whom were also minors when they left the UK for ISIS controlled territory in the Middle East. According to the best statistics available, of the total 800-900 ISIS affiliates who left the UK, around 50 were minors at the time they left¹ (with some, such as the infamous 'Jihadi' Jack Letts, who left as young adults, who were nonetheless recruited and radicalised as minors²).

The current most high profile such case is that of Shamima Begum, who left the UK while still a minor at 15 years old. Now 19, Begum has had her citizenship revoked by Home Secretary Sajid Javid, a decision which sparked strong public and policy debates about how cases like Begum's should be handled. Whether or not a legal challenge to the revocation of Begum's citizenship will be successful, it seems overwhelmingly likely that there will be many similar situations which the UK authorities will need to deal with soon; not all of which will be amenable to similar simplistic, if not draconian, solutions.

Inadequacies in existing guidance

When those like Begum, who were radicalised as minors, return to the UK as adults, there ought to be sound and consistent guidance in place for law enforcement and other relevant practitioners to rely on in attending to their cases. Such guidance is currently unavailable, and this absence is problematic for several reasons. First, this limits the options of the UK government and others who are involved in the returnees' repatriation; the fact that we have no special guidance on how to deal with returnees who were radicalised as children means that they will likely be dealt with in the same way as those radicalised as adults: specifically, they will be assessed as to whether they are a current security threat, and charged with any crimes they may have committed. While security and legal procedures such as these are necessary, as things stand authorities have no policy-based resources to distinguish those who were radicalised as children, and any accompanying special issues their cases may present as a result. This is likely to lead to unsatisfactory outcomes for returnees, their communities, and British society at large, and furthermore stands at odds with obligations the UK government has placed on itself to protect children from radicalisation and extremism.

¹ Cook and Vale p.17

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/uk-isis-recruits-syria-return-british-caliphate-terrorism-jihadis-a8781056.html>

Various authorities in the UK have a legal duty to 'prevent people from being drawn into terrorism'.³ Existing guidance specifically concerning how these authorities are obliged to prevent children from becoming radicalised, group that obligation alongside others which fall under the general label of 'safeguarding' (which includes protecting children from, among other things, sexual exploitation and physical abuse). Including preventing radicalisation as a safeguarding duty carries with it the (welcome) implication that, as well as preventing the wider social harms which radicalisation can cause, the Prevent duty is motivated *primarily* by the recognition that we, as a society (and the UK government in particular), have an obligation to protect children from the harms to which being radicalised might expose them.

We might, therefore, reasonably expect that the extensive existing advice issued by the UK Government, in the Prevent duty and elsewhere, would provide some guidance into how to understand and respond to the specific dangers posed to children by recruitment into extremist organisations. However, despite frequently warning of the 'risks of radicalisation', the relevant guidance offers no further details as to what those risks might be. This is a striking departure from safeguarding guidance concerning other risks to children; the other categories of risk each having their associated harms spelled out in some detail⁴. Nowhere in this guidance (which specified authorities are under a *legal obligation* to follow) is it even spelled out that children who are radicalised are at risk of criminal prosecution or physical harm should they participate in criminal or violent activities because of their radicalisation. Even these most basic harmful consequences to children are only mentioned obliquely, with the instruction that anybody (including children) who is suspected of already participating in illegal activity must be reported to the police.⁵

Why we must recognise the harm in radicalisation

This gap in the existing guidance is unfortunate. It is right that protecting children from radicalisation *should* be a safeguarding issue: there are, as we will shortly make clear, real and specific harms which even the *process* of radicalisation causes children and vulnerable people in particular. However, the fact that such harms are not spelled out carries with it the unfortunate implication that, should we *fail* to adequately safeguard children from radicalisation, we have not failed *the child* in the same way which we might think that we have failed a child who was drawn into sexual, physical or emotional abuse. If a child is radicalised, the lack of acknowledgement of any corresponding harm to that child makes a purely criminal response far more palatable: if the only risk we have acknowledged is the risk that the child may engage in illegal activity, then we lose nothing if we fail to prevent it, as long as the police can mitigate that risk after the fact through criminal proceedings.

The implication of the existing guidance that there is no specific harm in the process of radicalisation can be felt in the wider response to the Begum case. Nowhere in the official response to her case is it recognised that her radicalisation and consequent decision to leave the UK represents an abject failure of our duty to safeguard children

³ Prevent duty S.1

⁴ KCSIE 2018 §41-45

⁵ Prevent duty S 22

from precisely this kind of experience. That we have no clear, unambiguous position on what harms Begum, and those like her, were at risk of during their radicalisation means that the consequences of our failure cannot be made apparent; or, more precisely, that any real consequences can be entirely remedied by the criminal justice system and security services. A similar institutional attitude pervaded the entirely unsatisfactory response to the Rotherham grooming scandal, which has prompted a dramatic rethink of the way such cases are handled⁶. We would do well to think about the parallels between these two issues; the failure of a safeguarding duty being dealt with entirely within a criminal justice framework, with the harm to the children involved not adequately informing our response to their participation in the resulting criminal activities.

The wider political implications of the existing guidance aside, the fact that the Prevent duty is framed as a safeguarding issue, as well as the fact that the relevant guidance acknowledges generalised 'risks' to children from radicalisation, suggests that there ought to be some specific guidance as to what the potential harms to children from radicalisation and extremism are. In other words, having accepted that preventing the radicalisation of children is a part of the duty of care which the UK has to its children, we ought to have some clear idea of what exactly it is that we are protecting those children from.

The concept of Cultic Abuse

To say that radicalisation is systematically harmful to children is to say that radicalisation is a form of abuse. Abuse is defined in existing guidance as "a form of maltreatment of a child...by inflicting harm, or by failing to act to prevent harm."⁷ Radicalisation is not currently written of in UK safeguarding guidance as a form of abuse, but merely as a thing to be avoided; a choice clearly related to the avoidance of spelling out specific harms that radicalisation entails (once we say that radicalisation is *harmful*, given our definition of abuse, we must say that it is *abusive*).

There are four key areas of child abuse listed in existing guidance; physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. These are not intended to be exhaustive, and additional types of abuse have already been added in recognition of emerging issues which are likely to be an abusive experience for children; these recent additions include Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), County Lines and child sexual exploitation (CSE).

It may well be the case that children undergoing radicalisation may be exposed to varieties of abuse which are already listed as a part of that process. However, the existing named varieties of abuse do not adequately capture the specific harms which children may be exposed to during radicalisation.

There is, however, an existing concept which is extremely suitable for this purpose: *Cultic Abuse*. Cultic abuse describes the abusive character of recruitment into religious or other kinds of cult. The concept of Cultic Abuse is described in the

⁶ Haliday, Josh 2017 Police back 'Sammy's law' to pardon crimes of grooming victims
[The Guardian](#) accessed : 7.6.19

⁷ [Working Together to Safeguard Children HM Gov 2018](#)

following way by Anne Khodabandeh, herself a survivor of cultic abuse, and now an advocate and campaigner promoting the uptake of the concept by national and international authorities:

*Cultic Abuse occurs when an ideology or belief system is used alongside the systematic and sustained application of an array of recognised techniques for psychological manipulation without the knowledge or informed consent of the victim (aka brainwashing), in order to effect a breach of a person's psychological, emotional, intellectual and social integrity for the purposes of abuse, exploitation, slavery and/or pecuniary gain, and to so inhibit their critical faculties that they do not recognise their own predicament so that they may act in ways harmful to their, their family's and their society's best interests on instruction, by command or by neglect.*⁸

Although the idea of Cultic Abuse was developed to apply to cults as more traditionally understood, it is striking that the description of cultic abuse above very neatly captures the process of radicalisation into extremist groups. Furthermore, many links have already been made between the way terrorist groups such as ISIS and traditional cults operate. Masoud Banisadr, a former member of the formerly proscribed terrorist organisation MEK, has forcefully argued that “a terrorist organization is a cult or must change into a cult in order to survive. Therefore, to deal with terrorist organizations we must understand how to deal with cults.”⁹ The operational similarities between traditional cults and contemporary terrorist groups is also acknowledged by the UK's Counter Extremism Strategy describing, “Daesh and the creation of its cult-like “Caliphate”.”¹⁰ In short, these similarities are acknowledged by several authoritative sources, meaning that a good case can be made that, even where terrorist organisations may appear different from traditional cults in specifics (as, indeed, both cults and terrorist groups will differ from one another), we can learn much about the one from studying the other.¹¹

A working definition of ‘cult’ is given by the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)¹² 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”.*¹³

⁸ [Cults and Terror Anne Khodabandeh](#)

⁹ [Terrorist organisations are cults M Banisadr](#)

¹⁰ [UK Gov Counter Extremism Strategy 2018](#)

¹¹ [EU Home Affairs Radicalisation Awareness Network What we can learn from adjacent phenomena 16.5.18](#)

¹² [ICSA](#)

¹³ West, L. J., & Langone, M. D. (1986). Cultism: A conference for scholars and policy makers. *Cultic Studies Journal*, 3 pp119-120

It is striking that a part of what distinguishes cults according to the ICCSA definition is their manipulative and deceptive recruitment practices, which are also among the prominent abusive characteristics in the above definition of Cultic Abuse.

Dr Mehlman-Orozco asserts that this recruitment process has, *“clear patterns that can be used to explain how regular people are being conscripted into terrorism.”*¹⁴ The idea of terrorist organisations using, *“force, fraud, coercion and deception”* to recruit is explored thoroughly through Dr Mehlman-Orozco’s book and the same tactics are shown to be used for many different kinds of exploitation. Examples of coercion to sex-trafficking, sexual exploitation, gangs as well as terrorism can all be described in the same way, *“mental manipulation, deception that kept these girls and women compliant in their own exploitation – a mental tether as opposed to a physical chain.”*¹⁵ In the days following Shamima Begum being found in the al-Hawl camp in Syria, she was interviewed and subsequently judged by the world’s media on her responses. In his interview on 20.2.19, Anthony Lloyd¹⁶ describes Shamima as, *“a classic victim turned potential perpetrator: the groomed minor sat before me as a radicalised young adult.”* This is a clear description of the typical process experienced by young recruits to terrorism, a notion is supported by Lynne Wallis in a recent opinion piece where she explains *“the real version of themselves and everything they may have believed were destroyed when they were radicalised or, to use an old-fashioned term, brainwashed”*.¹⁷ This process of deceptive recruitment is also described well in a paper from the Radicalisation Awareness Network reviewing lessons learned from cults; *“both cults and extremist groups use tactics to attract and retain members in a manipulative way.”*¹⁸ This paper goes on to describe methods used to retain members including; *“several forms of violence, sexual, physical, psychological, spiritual...”*, indicating that deceptive recruitment is already kin to existing, recognised forms of abuse.

In conclusion, we recommend that the existing work on Cultic Abuse should be appropriated as a starting point to develop and issue guidance on what specific harms children who are recruited to terrorist organisations may be at risk from. Those harms may include compromising a child’s emotional, psychological and social integrity; encouraging isolation from family and peers; a malicious inhibition of a child’s critical faculties, and promoting a perceived dependence for stability, happiness or self-worth on a single group or ideology. These are, clearly, experiences which would be harmful to children, they are routinely suffered by children recruited into both cults and terrorist organisations, and they are harms which the Prevent duty must seek to protect children from.

¹⁴ [The Jihadi next door Dr K Mehlman-Orozco \(p19\)](#)

¹⁵ [The Jihadi next door Dr K Mehlman-Orozco \(p107\)](#)

¹⁶ [Anthony Lloyd interview with Shamima Begum The Times 20.2.19](#)

¹⁷ [Lynne Wallis Opinion piece The Guardian 11.3.19](#)

¹⁸ [EU Home Affairs Radicalisation Awareness Network \(RAN\) lessons from adjacent fields - Cults June 2017](#)