



VAN OUDER OP KIND

Een systematische literatuurstudie naar de intergenerationele overdracht van
extremistische denkbeelden binnen de gezinscontext

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Summary

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*Een verkennende studie naar de intergenerationele overdracht van jihadistisch
gedachtegoed binnen de gezinscontext*

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Summary

In 2019, the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) warned in its fiftieth edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment (DTN) of the potential danger posed by children growing up in a jihadist environment (NCTV, 2019). The idea was that children from families in which at least one parent adheres to a jihadist ideology, might adopt this ideology in the longer term. The aim of this report is therefore to gain more insight into the current knowledge about processes of intergenerational transmission of jihadist and extremist ideologies more generally, within a family context. As such, this exploratory study focuses on the following research question: What is known about the nature and extent of the intergenerational transmission of jihadism and other extremist ideologies? First, we will look at what is known about the prevalence of intergenerational transmission of such belief systems. In addition, we will examine the mechanisms underlying the transmission process; the protective and reinforcing factors associated with it; and their long-term consequences. Finally, we will consider the options for interventions to counter the intergenerational transmission of jihadist and broader extremist ideas within a family context.

Methods

The current study is based on a systematic literature review and a series of qualitative interviews. In the literature study, we did not only look at the (rather scarce) empirical literature on the transmission of jihadist ideas, but also at empirical studies on the transmission of extremism or radicalism more generally, as well as on sectarianism. At first, our literature search yielded over 40.000 studies of potential relevance. We ultimately selected 58 (mainly qualitative) studies that specifically dealt with ideological transmission from parent to child. Of these studies, 34 studies related to the transmission of Islamic-inspired radicalism and extremism, and 24 related to the transmission of other ideologies, including sectarianism, and leftwing- and rightwing-radicalism or -extremism. We supplemented the literature study with interviews with a total of 19 respondents – consisting of Dutch academic experts (N = 4); international academic experts (N = 5); and Dutch practitioners (N = 10). The interviews have been transcribed *ad verbatim* and coded with a deductive (thematic) approach.

Results

Prevalence of intergenerational transmission

On the basis of the literature study, few firm conclusions can be drawn about the prevalence of the intergenerational transmission of jihadist and extremist ideas. The included studies that examined this

aspect have mostly been conducted in non-Western contexts – so these findings cannot directly be translated to the West-European situation. In addition, regarding the interviews with experts and practitioners, many find it difficult identify the families where such transmission occurs. Although jihadists are generally not keen on being in the spotlight, a limited willingness among professionals to report or engage with these families, as well as ethical and legal obstacles, also make it difficult to estimate the scope of this phenomenon. Despite these limitations, almost all case experts indicate that they are familiar with one or more cases in which parents presumably played a stimulating role in the jihadist radicalization of their children. The academic experts we have spoken to, also consider it very likely that intergenerational transmission does indeed take place within extremist environments – based on their knowledge of radicalization processes and intergenerational transmission in general.

Mechanisms underlying intergenerational transmission

Our literature review has resulted in a conceptual model of the intergenerational transmission of extremist ideologies – of which the relevance has been confirmed in interviews with experts and practitioners. In this model, the family system, consisting of parents and their children, takes central stage. The dynamics with which parents influence their children in their ideological development, is then the result of various mechanisms – in which parents can take on both active and passive roles. In our study, we divided these mechanisms into five overlapping categories, at the discursive, socio-spatial, temporal, moral-educational and symbolic level.

1. *Discursive mechanisms* concern the verbal interactions between parent and child, through which children learn to interpret the world around them. This includes, for example, mechanisms of ‘othering’; employing a black and white world view; the use of victim narratives; an emphasis on the legitimacy of violence; and references to extremist or radical ancestors in the family lineage.
2. *Socio-spatial mechanisms* are about participation in social gatherings where children get the family ideology confirmed. Here, transmission is the result of parents keeping their children away from situations where they might come into contact with dissenters. Instead, these children are introduced to alternative social circles where they are exposed, often playfully, to the ‘right’ ideas. Socio-spatial transmission takes place, for example, by allowing children to participate in ideological youth movements; by having them perform small tasks with the parental network; by taking them to important ideological gatherings; or even by moving places for the sake of the family ideology. Experts and practitioners also point out the relevance of illegal ‘garage gatherings’ and emphasize that socio-spatial contact with like-minded people often also takes place within the online sphere.
3. *Temporal mechanisms* are about the ways in which parents strive for continuity in their ideological influence. Temporal forms of transmission are reflected in, among others, home

schooling and school selection; partner and friend group selection; media selection; and social control originating from the parental network. In this regard, the interviews also point to the importance of jihadist nanny-networks, and the employment of strict parental control over the movements of their children outside the family home, via telephone and social media.

4. *Moral-educational mechanisms* are the morality-based mechanisms through which parents (try to) influence their children's actions and enforce their adherence to the family ideology. It takes the shape of rewards and penalties; expressing expectations and encouragements; and instilling existential fear in children. The fact that parents may serve as a role model for their children, can also be considered a moral-educational mechanism.
5. *Symbolic mechanisms* consider the use of symbols and/or rituals that are characteristic of the family ideology at hand. In an extremist context, such transfer takes place, for example, through the use of attributes, home decoration, costumes and toys that emphasize (elements of) the family ideology.

Reinforcing and protective factors of intergenerational transmission

Transmission processes are further influenced by reinforcing and protective factors. The literature and interviews show that these factors can take place at the family level, the community level, and the level of individual children. For example, in childhood, factors such as gender, age, and cognitive abilities might influence the extent to which intergenerational transmission takes place. At a family level, processes of transmission can be related to, among others, experiences of trauma and victimization, delinquency or a refugee or migration background among parents. Finally, community-level factors such as stigmatization, discrimination and exclusion of the jihadist community as a whole might promote intergenerational transmission by reinforcing an us-them-mindset and feelings of victimization.

Our study further shows that while various types of family systems can generate processes of intergenerational transmission, there are reasons to believe that the factors and mechanisms described above are not randomly distributed among families. On the contrary, our research suggests that certain risk factors may be associated with specific transmission mechanisms, and vice versa. Moreover, potential trends can also be discerned for the risk factors. We will make a first step towards identifying these patterns, on the basis of a typology with three categories.

Three patterns of intergenerational transmission

The factors and mechanisms that emerged from the literature and the interviews can be roughly divided into three clusters: (1) factors and mechanisms in relation to the transfer of (collective) trauma; (2) factors and mechanisms related to transmission within unstable / criminogenic environments; (3) factors and mechanisms related to transmission within stable / loving environments.

In the first cluster of factors and mechanisms, a collective experience of suffering takes central stage. Here, feelings of victimization dominate the radical or extremist family ideology and its transmission. These feelings might stem from having a refugee status or a history of migration, but could also arise from negative experiences with the police or judicial authorities, social stigmatization or exclusion. The fact that the family does not feel part of the society at large underlies this type of transmission: children learn early on that they are part of a community that is severely affected by the acts or attitudes of an evil 'Other' – which subsequently fuels intergenerational transmission.

The second cluster includes factors and mechanisms that appear to be specifically related to criminogenic, unstable or unsafe environments. Family members may be involved in crime or organized violence, suffer from psychopathology, and/or struggle financially. Substance abuse, domestic violence and emotional or physical abuse also appear in this category – as well as possible neglect. Here, parents strongly differentiate between good and bad behavior, and manipulate their children's thoughts with images of fear, expectations, punishments, and rewards. Despite the low emotional involvement of these parents in the lives of their children, children show themselves loyal to their parents and hope that closely following the family ideology will bring them the validation that they long for.

The third cluster shows an entirely opposite dynamic. It concerns processes of intergenerational transmission occurring in loving and warm family environments. Signs of neglect or abuse are absent, and so is the use of victim narratives. Parents convey their ideas not merely on the basis of an enemy image or their own traumatic experiences, but because they truly want the best for their offspring. Children, in turn, would hardly, if at all, oppose these ideas. On the contrary, they are characterized by secure attachment patterns and a relationship of trust with their parents.

This third cluster is an interesting addition to the existing knowledge of radicalization, and is at odds with the 'broken homes'-thesis that prevails in radicalization studies (see, for example, Gielen, 2018; Weenink, 2015). It shows that even healthy and stable family systems are capable of producing extremist children through processes of intergenerational transmission – and that the share of extremist families in which this 'cluster three'-dynamic is at play, may be even greater than is currently assumed.

Implications for interventions

Intergenerational transmission can eventually lead to different outcomes or pathways. The literature shows that while some children do indeed choose the violent path – and, for example, join a terrorist organization or travel to conflict areas – this behavioral component is lacking in many. For them, the adoption of family ideology primarily consists of an internalization of parental ideas and, for example, the normalization of violence. This does not preclude the possibility that some of them may still feel the need to turn to violence later in life. However, since longitudinal research in this field is mostly lacking, little can be concluded in this regard. Unfortunately, our study also gained little insight into the children

who *do not* adopt the extremist ideology of their parents— as hardly any cases of this sort have previously been described or studied.

Nevertheless, our study suggests that there are ways to limit the negative consequences of these processes of intergenerational transmission, by means of interventions. For example, our findings point to the protective power that comes from non-radical or extremist influences from outside the family sphere; the importance of alternative identity formation; and the role of positive trigger events and exposure to people with different lifestyles or opinions. Yet, the non-coercive nature of these interventions is key, according to both the included studies and the interviews. The ideological reversal of children from these family backgrounds is ultimately based on an intrinsic change, and not on judicial countermeasures, as it turns out. Interventions ordered by authorities, such as detention and care orders generally appear to be limited in their effectiveness.

A second relevant angle with regard to interventions, which has emerged in both the interviews and the included literature, relates to the importance of a child protection perspective in combating intergenerational transmission. Ultimately, interventions should not be imposed with the aim of enhancing social cohesion or even purely for national security purposes, but mainly with the aim of protecting the well-being of the children at hand, according to experts. The literature supports this perspective. Several authors plead for caution in the application of interventions – especially in light of the risks of stigmatization and further exclusion of affected families (Ahdash, 2019; Bickerton, 2019).

Moreover, measures to prevent or counter intergenerational transmission should not only focus on jihadism, but also on other ideologies harmful to children. First and foremost because a focus on Islamic-inspired extremism would be morally debatable and potentially counterproductive – but also given the overlap that exists between transmission patterns of various radical and extremist ideas. Both the literature and the interviews suggest that there are profound similarities in the ways ideas are passed on from parent to child and the factors associated with this, across different contexts. Existing knowledge about (interventions in) other types isolationist communities, for example in relation to families in sects or in organized crime, could be used as a starting point when it comes to understanding extremist transmission within families as a phenomenon.

Concluding

The current report provides an overview of existing knowledge regarding the nature and extent of the intergenerational transmission of jihadist and extremist ideologies within a family context. It shows that there are valid reasons for continuing to study the development of children from such families. Both the systematic literature review and our interviews with academic experts and practitioners suggest that in some cases parents can indeed play an active role in the radicalization of their children.

Regardless, the critiques that have been directed at radicalization literature at large, also apply to this study. For example, the focus is on cases in which intergenerational transfer has had serious

consequences (such as terrorism), and we have only gained limited insight into the cases in which these consequences have not occurred. Moreover, this study is predominantly occupied with the unidirectional (parent-child) relationship, although there are good reasons to believe that this relationship much more complex in reality. The distinction used in this report between parents as ‘active radicalizers’ and children as ‘passively radicalized’ is perhaps all too simplistic, as it denies the role that children themselves may have in their radicalization process (see also Qureshi, 2018; Weggemans, Van der Zwan & Liem, 2018).

Moreover, one should take caution when applying these findings to case study or policy practice. It is crucial not to immediately guilt parents when their children show an interest in extremist ideas. Furthermore, the observation that some parents expose their children to extremist ideologies should not lead to thought-police practices or to the criminalization of parenting decisions made within individual families. Ultimately, it is probably only a small minority of families in which parents consciously push their children towards extremism.

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