CREDIBILITY OF INTERVENTION WORKERS

How the relationship between intervention practitioners and participants can influence the process of de-radicalisation

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INTRODUCTION

Leaving an extremist network is a process. It is not a one-time decision to be made. It is rather a series of decisions and changes made over time with the influence of both cognitive and social processes.

The process of de-radicalisation involves change and personal development in many respects, and it requires time and dedication on behalf of the individuals going through that process as well as anybody navigating the process with them. Therefore, for a de-radicalisation programme to increase its likelihood for positive outcomes, it is imperative to foster meaningful relationships between the programme participants and the practitioners. Mutual trust and respect between participants and practitioners builds the foundation for an open relationship, and therefore can facilitate the process of de-radicalisation. In the absence of such a relationship, it is more likely that participants will see the practitioners as insincere or not credible.

From the perspective of potential participants, credible practitioners can lend legitimacy to the de-radicalisation programme and its goals. Leading figures whose opinions and/or activities participants appreciate could spark the interest of potential participants, and give the programme credibility in their eyes.

For an intervention to make progress, it must make concerted efforts to not be abrasive or accusatory in nature. Potential results are more promising for an intervention if the people participating in the intervention feel that they are trusted. If the people coordinating the intervention have a condescending demeanour toward the participants—be they prisoners, former prisoners, minorities in society or members of extremist organizations—the participants may feel disrespected and doubt the sincerity of the programme's intentions. Such perceived disrespect and lack of confidence can be detrimental to the process of de-radicalisation (Briggs, Fieschi and Lownsbrough, 2006).

In the case of interventions addressing religious extremism it is important to clarify that the goal is not to discredit a given religion, but rather the distorted misuse of that religion that some use as a motivation for terrorism (Carpenter, Scott J.; Levitt, Matthew; Jacobson, Michael; 2009).

Credible figures, such as people who were formerly extremists of the same ideology, but have since de-radicalised, can strengthen the argument for reintegrating into mainstream society. They are in the unique position of being able to empathize with participants while simultaneously serving as an example of someone who has made the transition from extremism to mainstream society. Hearing first-hand stories about leaving radical groups and successfully reintegrating into mainstream society gives participants someone to relate to, therefore providing a more trustworthy environment for them to let their guard down, ask the questions that really concern them, and listen to new information.

METHOD

The SAFIRE project set out in part to improve the fundamental understanding of the process of radicalisation in order to advance policy, practice, and further research. Part of this effort to provide a more nuanced perception of the process of radicalisation was exploring the notion of radicalisation as a process, as well as past and existing de-radicalisation, counter-radicalisation and disengagement programmes. We furthermore did a thorough search of the literature about how to maximize the potential of counter-radicalisation efforts. This all painted a clearer picture of the state of de-radicalisation practice and theory at the outset of the SAFIRE project, to be used as a starting point for our further contributions to the literature on the process of radicalisation and programme design.

These avenues of research led us to a wealth of literature about the effects of credible and trustworthy practitioners. Their experiences and understanding of the cognitive and emotional reasoning of both radical and non-radical viewpoints have the potential to facilitate trust, interest and participation on the part of radicalising individuals.

There is not one definition of radicalisation on which everybody agrees. There are myriad definitions of radicalisation in the literature, which in part emphasize the disparity between radicalisation, and violent radicalisation and terrorism. Comprehending these distinctions shaped our research and should also shape the efforts that aim to counter radicalisation so that they can protect the safety of societies while preserving individuals' right to free thought.

Results & conclusions

Including credible figures is something that is universally relevant to de-radicalisation efforts regardless of the type of radical ideology being addressed or type of intervention being carried out. Since the process of radicalisation is often related to distrust of society and rejection of social norms, having someone who is respected by the participants take a leading role in the intervention can legitimize the intentions of the intervention from the perspective of the participants (Briggs, Fieschi and Lownsbrough, 2006). Including credible figures in de-radicalisation programmes may also build trust between the participating individuals and the entities that are involved in the intervention, such as social organisations, police, and/or governmental figures.

According to Carpenter, Levitt and Jacobson, the effectiveness of a de-radicalisation intervention relies on the ability of the practitioners and participants to communicate and relate to one another. They note that participants are more likely to embrace the concepts and objectives of an intervention if they consider the leading practitioners to be credible sources of information. Kruglanski and Fishman explain this concept by using the example of a de-radicalisation programme focusing on radicalisation toward Islamic terrorism. According to them, including active moderate Muslim clerics in such an intervention encourages credible communication efforts while undermining the ideological incentives of suicide terrorism. Moderate religious authorities whose thoughts and direction the participants respect can present theological arguments against terrorism and using Islam as a rationale for terrorism. They can offer discussion, for example, on Islam prohibiting the harming of innocent people, and the Quran warning against pushing beliefs too far (primary interview with intervention director).

The subject of credibility of intervention workers is actionable for people tasked with designing and directing de-radicalisation programmes. They can utilize this knowledge to structure de-radicalisation interventions that incorporate credible figures such as former extremists and/or representatives of moderate forms of relevant ideologies.

Practitioners who share a common ground with participants and are able to make a connection with them based on mutual trust and respect can establish a comfort level, acceptance, and even a desire to participate on the part of the participants. Therefore, the incorporation of credible figures into the design and activities of the programme have an increased chance of facilitating the progress towards the programme's goals for each individual.