A study on the transmission of extremism within a family context

28 June 2021

Systematic literature study and interviews

This report focuses on the prevalence and processes associated with the intergenerational transmission of extremist ideas. Based on a systematic literature study, in which a selection of 58 studies was made from more than 40,000 publications, and interviews with Dutch and international experts and practitioners, ISGA researchers looked at the current academic knowledge on this topic. Important insights were gained into the various mechanisms by which extremist parents try to influence their children and the factors that can strengthen or weaken this influence. Moreover, new perspectives on possible interventions to counter the transmission of extremism within family contexts were discussed.

Results of the study

In the first place, this study shows that still much is unclear about the extent to which intergenerational transmission of jihadist or other extremist ideas takes place. There are also still many questions about the situation in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the report suggests that intergenerational transmission of extremist ideas does in fact occur. It arises from a complex interplay of reinforcing factors and mechanisms within and outside the family sphere. The ways in which parents feed their children with extremist beliefs are sometimes explicit and direct (such as parents taking their children to ideological meetings), but can also be indirect in nature (such as children mirroring their parents' example). Liem: "Our research shows that intergenerational transmission has no single pattern—and that it can manifest itself in many different family systems."

Further, families where transmission occurs are not by definition unstable or unsafe: warm and loving parents, too, can pass on extremist ideas to their children. Finally, protective factors against intergenerational transmission include, among
others, moderate influences outside the family sphere; alternative identity formation; positive trigger events; and exposure to people with different lifestyles or ideas. Liem: "Ultimately, this is probably about a small minority of families in which parents deliberately push their children toward extremism."

**Similarities with transmission in other contexts**

The intergenerational transmission of extremist ideologies as a research topic will likely gain in relevance in the upcoming years. Liem: "The research shows that there are valid reasons to continue studying the development of children from extremist families." As such, the question of which interventions are suitable to prevent or counter transmission within the family context deserves more attention. Interviewed experts and practitioners highlight a child protection perspective in countering intergenerational transmission.

Ultimately, interventions should not be imposed as an effort to enhance social cohesion, nor to protect national security—but rather, with the objective to safeguard the well-being of children at hand. Also, from a governmental perspective, the focus should not only be on jihadism, but also on other ideologies that are potentially harmful to children. Firstly because a focus on Islamic-inspired extremism could possibly be counterproductive—but also because of the similarities regarding transmission processes in various radical and extremist contexts. Both the literature and the interviews suggested that the ways in which ideas are passed on from parent to child within different ideological contexts may be very similar. Going forward, the ISGA researchers will build on existing knowledge on (interventions in) other contexts—such as families in sects or criminal milieus—to better understand transmission processes in jihadist families.

**More information:** The report 'Van ouder op kind' [Dutch]: www.universiteitleiden.nl/bina ... -kind_definitief.pdf

Provided by Leiden University