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Rotten trees, bad apples? Understanding the intergenerational transmission of extremism

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SUMMARY

The influence that parents have on their children's development has been well established in a myriad of academic disciplines. Broadly speaking, we know that parents (and parental figures in general) are of key importance for children's values, ideas and beliefs in life. Nonetheless, little is known about whether extremist ideologies are similarly passed down from one generation to the next, nor do we know what such processes may look like in practice. This dissertation aims to examine the ways in which right-wing extremist and jihadist parents convey their violent worldviews to their children. I approach this research topic using the concept of 'intergenerational transmission', which refers to the process by which parents pass on various behaviors and beliefs to their children. Using a wide array of data, including existing academic literature, interviews with practitioners and (former) extremists, aggregated intelligence data and court rulings, I aim to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the estimated scope of the intergenerational transmission of extremism in the Netherlands? How many children are at risk of being raised with extremist ideas?
2. How can we explain the intergenerational transmission of extremist ideologies? What mechanisms are involved in this process?
3. To what extent and how can various factors and dynamics (within and beyond the family) stimulate or inhibit extremist transmission processes?
4. To what extent does the intergenerational transmission of extremism have long-term consequences for the families involved?

In answering these questions, I opt for a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from various fields, such as psychology, sociology, and criminology, to comprehensively understand how extremist ideologies are transmitted from one generation to the next. By taking this approach, this dissertation contributes to our (currently still limited) empirical knowledge about the intergenerational transmission of extremist beliefs.

The scope of intergenerational transmission

In answering the first research question, I had the possibility to work on a collaborative research project with the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD). In this project, a national-level dataset on Dutch individuals identified as jihadists was matched to the Personal Records Database (BRP). This allowed for an analysis of family structures and household compositions within the Dutch jihadist community. Findings (as of 12 September 2022) indicate that the intergenerational transmission of jihadism might indeed take place in the Netherlands. Jihadist parents collectively have 665 children (551 minor-aged), all of which could theoretically be raised within a jihadist family environment. Moreover, data indicates that 4.4% of children with jihadist

parents have themselves been identified by the AIVD as jihadists. Additionally, fact that nearly half of the minor-aged children in the study grow up in dual-jihadist parent households, could increase the likelihood of ideological transmission.

Other risk factors were identified, including children's possibly limited exposure to moderating influences. Only 8.7% of jihadist children live in extended family households, and 33.1% grow up in single-parent homes, with 93 children raised by a sole caregiver identified as a jihadist. This lack of ideological counterbalance may reinforce extremist beliefs within children. Additionally, trauma and victimhood narratives might contribute to transmission risks. Over 5% of children in the dataset were born in Syria, potentially experiencing war-related trauma. Furthermore, 6.6% of jihadist parents died in conflict zones. Both observations may foster children's ideological radicalization through intergenerational loyalty, the romantication of martyrdom, and collective victimhood.

Three dimensions of intergenerational transmission

In order to qualitatively understand the processes of intergenerational transmission within extremist families, I first conducted a systematic literature review to gain insight into existing literature on this topic. The results of the systematic review support the observation that extremist ideologies can be transmitted across generations. Moreover, the findings indicate that processes of intergenerational transmission can hardly be studied in isolation. Instead, intergenerational transmission takes place within a complex and layered context of specific family dynamics, interactions, and risk and protective factors. Most notably, the literature suggests that ideological socialization mechanisms, everyday parenting practices of extremist parents, and the (extremist) narratives of parenthood that they adhere to, seem pivotal in understanding the exact workings of these mechanisms, and may ultimately determine the long-term outcomes of these processes.

Based on these observations, I developed an integrated framework that serves to better understand the mechanisms involved in the intergenerational transmission of extremism within families. The framework combines classic transmission mechanisms (i.e., social learning and socialization theory) with broader developmental approaches such as attachment and parenting style theory, as well as symbolic interactionist theories that emphasize the importance of storytelling and narratives in transmission processes. In short, it revolves around three core dimensions: (1) socialization mechanisms, (2) parenting practices, and (3) narratives of parenthood. These three dimensions, which will be discussed in detail below, became the backbone of my empirical study, as well as the eventual structure of this dissertation.

Socialization mechanisms

Regarding the first dimension, ideological socialization mechanisms, the empirical data of this research project shows that parents directly and indirectly try to instill their beliefs in their children. They may for example explicitly teach their children about the extremist family ideology, put ideological rules and regulations in place, and punish or reward children for their respective (dis)obeyance. Additionally, parents might choose to surround children with like-minded individuals, as to ensure social control and secondary socialization through peers. However, indirect (or child-dependent) mechanisms of transmission also play a role. Indirect mechanisms pertain to how children subsequently deal with the beliefs provided by their parents, and the various factors involved in their adoption or rejection of the ideology. The data points at the importance of children's loyalty to their parents, the romanticization of extremist ideology by children, and multigenerational transmission processes. At the same time, the findings suggest that the intergenerational transmission of extremism is not always successful. This is because, on the one hand, besides parental transmission efforts, children must also be receptive to the extremist ideology. The interview data indicates that this receptivity is sometimes lacking, and some children indeed prove resilient to their parents' extremist beliefs. On the other hand, the data indicates that in both right-wing extremist and jihadist families, not all extremist parents have the desire to transmit their beliefs to their children. To protect their children from the violence and hatred of their ideology, they sometimes opt to keep their children completely away from their extremist 'double lives'. Regardless, this observation does not negate the possibility of transmission occurring indirectly, as children may be drawn to their parents' ideology of their own accord.

Parenting practices

Moreover, the data shows that the socialization mechanisms outlined above need to be considered against a more general backdrop of everyday interactions between family members. Arguably, not all parenting practices exhibited in these families are aimed at the pursuit of ideological transmission, yet they may still play a role in children's susceptibility to their parents' ideas. For example, it was observed that children who are raised in dysfunctional or unsafe family situations, may develop insecure attachment styles and/or misplaced loyalty towards their parents, which could stimulate the intergenerational transmission of extremist ideas in the long run. At the same time, this study also demonstrates that some extremist parents are indeed capable of providing their children with a safe, warm, and loving upbringing. Both right-wing extremist and jihadist parents may prove to be committed and involved parents. This applies to both fathers and mothers in both milieus – contrary to earlier studies that suggest that specifically mothers play a pivotal role in extremist families. The effect this has on transmission processes is not clear from this study. Children who were raised in emotionally supportive environments, are more likely to develop secure attachment

styles and tend to have a more positive self-image and more self-confidence. On the other hand, an ideology that is transmitted in a non-coercive manner may be easier to adopt, considering the trusting and loving bond that exists between parents and children in healthy family systems. These potential dynamics deserve more attention in future research on the transmission of extremist ideologies.

Lastly, this study suggests that a remarkable portion of (former) jihadist interview participants struggle with their parental role while in prison. This is partly due to the practical constraints of detention (e.g., limited time to engage with their children) and partly due to the emotional distance that some experience. Results suggest that detained (former) extremist parents would benefit from more pedagogical and practical support in raising their children, both during and after imprisonment.

Narratives of parenthood

The findings further suggest that the intergenerational transmission of extremism is inherently connected to individual ideas and assumptions about parenthood. Ultimately, the topic of parenthood is a crucial concern in extremist ideologies, subsequently influencing the everyday family lives of extremist parents. Additionally, parenting styles can indirectly increase susceptibility to extremist messaging among children. The results suggest that (former) right-wing extremist and jihadist parents have diverse ideas about the meaning of ‘good’ parenthood, with varying perceptions of their influence on and responsibility for their children’s development. Overall, the data highlights the importance of discipline and civilization as central values in (extremist) parenthood, suggesting that both right-wing extremist and jihadist parents may lean towards authoritarian parenting styles, where discipline and order play a significant role.

Gender roles are also a key topic in narratives of extremist parenthood. In both jihadist and right-wing extremist environments, women are put on a pedestal due to their childbearing capacity. This is simultaneously an inherent part of the extremist ambitions of mothers: giving birth to a new generation of extremists is considered both an individual and a collective duty, the research shows. For men, parenthood is less central to their violent ambitions; they primarily fulfill their role as extremist fighters within their organization and, to a lesser extent, as heads of families.

However, extremist narratives about parenthood are not always adhered to in practice, as double standards among parents are not uncommon – particularly in right-wing extremist milieus. Despite the extremist ideology instructing parents to bring forth a new generation of ‘fighters’, it was observed that parents often choose not to raise their children with these beliefs. The danger and stress that come with a life as an extremist are not always something they wish upon their children. Moreover, ideological conflicts among partners, where fathers and mothers do not see eye to eye on their extremist beliefs, sometimes hinder the intergenerational transmission of these beliefs.

Finally, the data suggest that parenthood itself can be a first step towards a deradicalization process for parents. Having children can be a life-changing experience, leading parents to discover another side of their identity, and may teach them to take responsibility for something greater than themselves and their ideology. Becoming a parent in may thus serve as a ‘turning point’ for extremists – a finding that fits with established life-course approaches within criminology.

Aftermath

Both children who grew up in extremist families and former extremist parents experience various long-term consequences of their family history. Negative reactions from the outside world, including stigmatization and labeling, are often encountered in the data. Such hostilities may reinforce the transmission of extremist ideologies by strengthening the isolation of extremist families, keeping potential counter-narratives at bay, and possibly fueling the (collective) victim narratives that children from extremist families are often raised with.

However, children do not necessarily follow in their parents’ extremist footsteps. Various reasons may lead individuals to abandon the extremist family ideology. My study indicates that counter-narratives and encounters with “the Other,” as well as new-found forms of identity-seeking and meaning-making—including involvement in (Eastern) religious practices and self-study—are central to this process. This suggests that countering the isolation of the extremist family is crucial to allowing other stories and worldviews to enter, thereby facilitating deradicalization. My study also reveals that, for some, it is necessary to sever ties with extremist family members to develop a new identity.

Regardless, even individuals who managed to overcome the family ideology tend to struggle with trauma and mental health issues. They also often face challenges in their later parental roles, fearing that their history makes them unsuitable to raise a child. Finally, this dissertation shows that former extremist parents, too, are haunted by their past. They usually look back with shame and regret on the parenting decisions they made. Some choose to have a moment of explicit disclosure where they explain their past decisions to their children. Such open and honest conversations are likely crucial for both parent and child to reconcile with their extremist family history.

Conclusion

This study constitutes an important first step in understanding the intergenerational transmission of extremist ideas – a field of study that is still underdeveloped. It has become clear that children from extremist families are indeed at risk of being raised as extremists themselves. It remains however unclear what the actual scope of this phenomenon is. The quantitative analysis of intelligence data suggests that in the Netherlands, there are some children that grow up with at least one parent that adheres to jihadist ideologies, which justifies further (longitudinal) research

on this group. However, based on this study alone, I cannot draw any conclusions regarding the scope of children receiving a right-wing extremist upbringing, nor about the number of children at risk of intergenerational transmission beyond the Netherlands.

Regardless, and despite individual differences in family backgrounds and relations, general patterns can be discerned in the ways children are raised within extremist environments. It was observed that intergenerational transmission occurs within a broader context of mutual interactions between parents, children and the outside world. These interactions are central to the ways extremist beliefs are passed on from one generation to the next. This dissertation therefore demonstrates that transmission mechanisms can best be understood as arising out of three dimensions: socialization mechanisms, everyday parenting practices and narratives of extremist parenthood.

As observed, extremist parents can actively contribute to processes of intergenerational transmission. However, in socializing their children into extremist ideologies, they are typically not driven by malicious intent, but rather by the perceived ‘dangerousness’ of the outside world, and a resulting desire to protect their children against existential threats. Moreover, children raised in extremist households do not necessarily look back negatively on their upbringing, and many of the interviewees in this study do not harbor any resentment towards their extremist parents. In some cases, a healthy and loving relation between extremist parents and their children can even be observed. These insights are vital for shaping intervention and prevention strategies to counter extremist transmission within the family. In developing such programs, emphasis should be placed on systemic approaches that focuses on both parents and children and the dynamics between them. In cases where serious indications of developmental risks to children are absent, caution should be exercised in implementing drastic measures in extremist families. Interventions by authorities may exacerbate family members’ distrust, potentially leading to further social isolation and, consequently, stimulating the intergenerational transmission of these ideas.

It should be noted that this dissertation primarily illustrates what extremist family life *may look like*. Besides some similarities, various differences among households were observed. Therefore, the results of this study are not intended for interpreting individual cases, where a customized approach is always preferred. Regardless, this dissertation provides a first glimpse into the mechanisms and dynamics with which the intergenerational transmission of extremism may take place. The results of the research underscore the importance of an interdisciplinary approach in studying the intergenerational transmission of extremism. I found that concepts and elements from various fields may prove valuable in understanding these mechanisms – including pedagogy and developmental psychology, criminology, sociology, victimology, and terrorism studies. This interdisciplinary nature should play a central role in future research on extremist transmission processes.