Under the influence

How are young people drawn into extremist groups? Alexandra Stein looks at the processes involved and how schools can develop recognition and resistance among their students

In 2008 16-year-old Hammaad Munshi became the youngest convicted terrorist in the United Kingdom. Munshi had been arrested at 15 and was later sentenced for possession of information likely to be used for terrorist purposes. Along with information on bomb-making, he was also found with two bags of ball-bearings, commonly used by suicide bombers to inflict damage on their targets. Sadik Ibrahim, a friend of the Munshi family, described the boy he knew:

'Hammaad was a normal boy...The lad himself was a good little boy who did listen to his parents and generally stayed out of trouble...I didn't believe it. This was no way this was happening to this family... Hammaad was definitely radicalized. I mean look at him: he's 15 years old; he's a young kid. Hammaad was groomed and it was done intentionally. They knew exactly what they were doing with Hammaad.'

A community policeman, Mohammed Aziz, commented:

'I've known the family for a very long time...a very educated family and a very understanding family as well. From my information this young lad has been radicalized by a group.'

In fact, it was the then 20-year-old Aabid Khan who recruited Hammaad Munshi. Munshi did not just discover an appealing set of ideas randomly found on the internet – he was deliberately groomed by Khan who had links to terrorist groups. And those further up the chain undoubtedly groomed Khan.

As with the 9/11 bombers, what we are seeing is the deliberate targeting and recruitment of youth by well-organized internationally-linked extremist groups, as, for instance, described by Ed Husain in his book *The Islamist* or by Masoud Banisadr in his account of the Iranian Mojahedin. But it is not just Islamic fundamentalists targeting young people. Jeremiah Duggan was only 22 when he died in 2003 under suspicious circumstances after becoming involved with recruiters for the right-wing Lyndon Larouche international political cult. Social psychologists such as Philip Zimbardo argue that it is not a particular religious or political ideology but the strong situation of increasing isolation within closed, coercive groups that creates the dangerous behaviours of violent extremism across the political spectrum.

Did Hammaad or Jeremiah know about social influence pressures? Had they ever learned the dynamics of the bullying relationship? Did they know the dangers of becoming isolated from friends and family? Had they ever been taught about the recruitment and manipulation methods of extremist groups, cults or controlling relationships?

As educators, we have a two-fold task in teaching about violent extremism. On the one hand we need to help people understand the context of acts such as that described in Karl Sweeney's article in this issue. On the other hand, we need to help children and young people understand and recognise the vulnerabilities that we all share to processes of extreme social influence. In this way we can help our students build resilience and learn to resist such pressures in order to protect themselves and those around them.

Zimbardo, and others who study extremist groups, cults and coercive persuasion, understand that the key to prevention is education. This is education about the structures and processes of recruitment, grooming and conversion to totalitarian, ideologically extremist groups.

I teach university level modules on the social psychology of totalitarianism, ideological extremism and cults and I also present selected material to school-age groups. In class we cover the social psychology, structures and processes of a range of groups, from extremist right-wing groups, such as Lyndon LaRouche's group, to the sexually abusive Children of God, and from extremist Islamist groups to Pol Pot's totalitarian and murderous regime in 1970s Cambodia. In their end-of-term evaluations students consistently feed back that this is one of the most important classes they had ever taken. Several have stated that during the term of the module itself they had cause to use this new information to help either themselves or friends and family to stay away from dangerous groups. Others ask why they had never before been taught this clearly important and useful material.

What they are learning is primarily behavioural, rather than ideological. We focus on the social structures, the methods of social influence, and the behaviours that are common to all of these groups. We are less concerned with the particular ideologies or belief systems of these various groups (though we do touch on them – particularly on the exclusive structure of these belief systems). Teaching this in a comparative way, across a range of what appear to be totally different points on the ideological spectrum, achieves multiple goals. First, it does not highlight or stigmatise a particular religious, political, or ethnic group and so does not provide further fuel for extremist groups' stated grievances. Second, it gives students the tools to recognise a dangerous social relationship regardless of the ideological sheep's clothing it might be covered in. Third, focusing on the problem as being one of dangerous social relationships means it can readily be connected to social problems such as bullying or domestic violence.

This is not indoctrination, rather, it is education about how to recognise and resist indoctrination!

Drawing on work from Hannah Arendt, Robert Jay Lifton and others, we start with this five-point definition of an extremist group that can result – in the most extreme cases – in deploying followers to such actions as suicide bombings:

Leadership: the group is led by a charismatic and authoritarian leader

Structure: it is isolating and has a closed, steeply hierarchical inner structure

Ideology: the leader imparts (and controls) an exclusive belief system that allows only one interpretation

Process: processes of coercive persuasion are used to isolate and control followers through a combined dynamic of 'love' and fear

Result: followers are exploited and unable to act in their own survival interests. Violence often results.

These groups succeed because they operate based on universal human (and usually adaptive) responses of people seeking comfort and connection when afraid. The process unfolds by isolating recruits from prior sources of comfort, establishing the group as the new safe haven, and then instilling fear to create what is known as a trauma bond. The principal goal of the leader in their drive to control followers is to isolate each follower. This is now well understood by many social psychologists. If teachers have the appropriate background and training this understanding can be taught in interesting and accessible ways to children and young people.

Teaching children and young people how to make good decisions about their social involvements, about how to protect themselves and their communities must be seen as a priority

For over 60 years social scientists from Asch to Milgram, from Sherif to Zimbardo, and from Arendt to Lifton have been developing a broad knowledge base about these fundamental human vulnerabilities and the groups and situations that exploit them. In her book, *Prisons we choose to live inside*, Doris Lessing argued for disseminating this knowledge to our children in order to challenge our 'most primitive and instinctive reactions' – those which so often have led us to act against our own interests and our own survival. Along with Lessing, classic works by George Orwell and Primo Levi cover the same territory. There is also a wealth of newer literature, much of it written in compelling memoir form by a diverse range of authors, that documents these processes in a personal, moving and highly accessible manner suitable for classes in literature or the social sciences.

A strategic view is needed to introduce this into the curriculum. It may be necessary to collaborate with experts in this field to train or update teachers in both the classic social-psychological studies as well as the most recent research available and work to develop materials and curricula for classrooms at various age levels. It may be helpful to consult colleagues in Germany where, due to their own history with totalitarianism, this material is routinely taught.

This approach can be integrated across the curriculum in many creative ways. In the more obvious areas such as history, religious studies, literature or media studies, students can look at case studies through the lens of a social influence model. In psychology and sociology students can learn about the individual and group dynamics of extreme social influence in its various forms. Even in the hard sciences, learning about ethical standards can include how these become compromised in totalitarian or cultic systems, linking this to influence pressures on individuals.

For example, there are two films readily available on YouTube that can be used in the classroom. *A Class Divided* documents Jane Elliot's innovative and challenging primary school classroom exercise in prejudice – very simply done in class by separating children into groups by eye colour. As long as children are effectively debriefed and experience both sides of the exercise (being on both the giving and receiving ends of the resulting prejudice) this can be a powerful lesson. Similarly, the US film *The Wave* details a high school teacher's attempt to teach teenagers about the Holocaust – an attempt that quickly gets out of control but which results in valuable and lifelong lessons.

But teaching this 'social literacy' – teaching children and young people how to make good decisions about their social involvements, about how to protect themselves and their communities – must be seen as a priority. It is absolutely core to Citizenship Education: how do we work together in community to manage our affairs for the common good? And how do we distinguish this from those who may use these same ideas to recruit young people to an agenda that turns out to be the very opposite.

The tragic anniversary of 9/11 can be the catalyst to create projects that take on the task of training core groups of teachers, developing sample materials,

and teaching a range of classes with appropriate evaluations. Based on this experience further assessment and development of such programmes can be carried forward.

Perhaps then a future 15-year-old – one who has had some basic education in the structures, processes and dangers of totalitarian groups – will be able to recognise and turn away from a recruiter who promises liberation and glory but who will deliver only the most extreme exploitation. And perhaps other young people may gain a better understanding of the social processes that can entangle them or their peers in what may otherwise seem to be incomprehensible involvements.

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Books I use with my students

Some cases – memoir and fiction:

Golding, William. 1959. *Lord of the flies; a novel*. New York: Capricorn Books.
Hunt, Irmgard A. 2005. *On Hitler's Mountain: Overcoming the legacy of a Nazi childhood*. New York, NY: William Morrow.
Husain, Ed. 2007. *The Islamist: why I joined radical Islam in Britain, what I saw inside and why I left*. London: Penguin.
Jal, Emmanuel. 2009. *War child: a boy soldier's story*. London: Abacus.
Jones, Celeste, Kristina Jones, and Juliana Buhring. 2007. *Not without my sister*. London: Harper Element.
Koestler, Arthur. 1968. *Darkness at noon*. London: Longmans.
Layton, Deborah. 1998. *Seductive poison: a Jonestown survivor's story of life and death in the Peoples Temple*. New York: Anchor Books.
Levi, Primo. 1986. *The drowned and the saved*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
Min, Anchee. 1994. *Red Azalea*. New York: Pantheon Books.
Orwell, George. 1946. *Animal Farm*. New York: Signet Classic.
Orwell, George. 1949. *1984*. New American Library: New York.
Stein, Alexandra. 2002. *Inside out: A memoir of entering and breaking out of a Minneapolis political cult*. St. Cloud: North Star Press of St. Cloud.
Wall, Elissa. 2008. *Stolen Innocence*. HarperCollins

A short selection of books on social influence processes:

Asch, Solomon E. 1952. *Social psychology*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
Cialdini, Robert. 1984. *The psychology of influence*. New York: William Morrow.
Lifton, Robert Jay. 1999. *Destroying the world to save it*: Aum Shinrikyo, apocalyptic violence, and the new global terrorism. New York: Henry Holt.
Lofland, John. 1977. *Doomsday Cult: a study of conversion, proselytization, and maintenance of faith*. New York: Irvington Publishers (distributed by Halsted Press).
Singer, Margaret and J. Lalich. 1995. *Cults in our midst: The hidden menace in our everyday lives*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
Taylor, Kathleen E. 2004. *Brainwashing: the science of thought control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Zimbardo, Philip. 2007. *The Lucifer effect: Understanding how good people turn evil*. New York: Random House.