

Securitising Social Work: Counter Terrorism, Extremism and Radicalisation

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Introduction:

This chapter critically explores an emerging area of social work practice in the UK, namely its increasing role in counter-terrorism activities. The chapter explores the policy context within which social work in the UK, as well as many other professions, has now become legally mandated to identify and prevent violent extremism and terrorism, as well as report and/or work with, families or individuals where there are concerns about radicalisation and extremism. We argue that whilst the social work professions incursion into counter terrorism work is presented in a benign and straightforward manner; i.e. as an extension of “normal” safeguarding activities, rather, this is evidence of an increasingly securitised profession. We will subsequently explore the concept of securitisation that is traditionally used in International Relations, to evidence our concerns about increasingly securitised social work activities, by drawing on the work of Buzan, Waever and De Wilde (1998).

We recognise that whilst the social work profession’s relationship with the state has always been problematic in term of the care versus control tension (Lavalette, 2011), the move into what is in effect, counter terrorism work, is something that social work practitioners should not accept uncritically, or even possibly at all. Our concern is that such policy and practice shifts, moves social work in the UK very decisively towards a securitised profession, away from one that is ethics and rights based. Whilst this chapter is written from a UK social policy perspective, given the globalisation and the issues of terrorism across the world, it is likely that social workers worldwide may be tasked with managing the “problem” of radicalisation and extremism, in terms of identification and prevention, like the UK context, or perhaps working directly with those impacted by radicalisation and extremism, for example, returnees from conflict zones such as Syria, or indeed victims of terrorist attacks. The chapter begins with a brief account of the global context.

The Global Context:

Terrorism, despite the debates about a satisfactory definition (see for example Smelser, 2007 and Horgan, 2014), has long been a feature of many societies. Indeed, Koomen and Van Der Pligt (2016) argue that there have been reliably documented incidences of terrorism going back 2000 years. It is clear therefore, that many people historically and currently, are impacted adversely by terrorism,

either directly or indirectly. Growing up in the 1970s and the 1980s in the UK for example, we recall all too well the conflict between the British state and the Irish republican movement and the resulting terrorist attacks that took place in Northern Ireland and the mainland (England). The 9/11 attack in the US, nonetheless was deeply shocking, and unprecedented in the scale, as were the later atrocities committed in London on 7th July 2015 and the Manchester bombing in 2017 . More recently, a number of countries in Europe, for example Italy, France and Germany have witnessed a rise in terrorist attacks. Indeed, in the early stages of writing this chapter, a terrorist attack took place in Barcelona, and a terrorist incident occurred in Finland. The causes of terrorism are therefore historically and globally complex (Crenshaw, 2010). The impact of such terrorist attacks understandably causes uncertainty, panic and anxiety for governments, as well as significant worry for the populace. We acknowledge at the outset therefore, that domestic UK policy is inextricably linked to wider global issues and concerns, and in our subsequent analysis that follows, certainly do not wish to minimise the very real and pressing concerns about terrorism in the UK, and further afield. Indeed, as UK citizens, we support counter terrorism activity to ensure that those who wish to do harm in the name of religious or political ideology, are identified and prosecuted. We feel the need to assert this, because in our experience, challenge of UK counter-terrorism policy and its impact on social work, has led to accusations of being apologists for terrorism, amongst other accusations which we explore later. Our aim here however, is to challenge such binary discourses, of being for or against counter terrorism prevention strategies, often referred to in the UK as “Preventing PREVENT” (Hussein, 2016). Such binaries discourses of course, are widely prevalent but our aim however is to explore the “messy” middle ground, namely that if social workers in the UK and possibly further afield, are increasingly legislated to be involved in counter-terrorism activities, how can it be done, safely, ethically and within the confines of social work values. We now move on to consider the UK counter terrorism and policy context.

The Policy Context:

In July 2015, The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act became statute in the UK. This required a range of public institutions, i.e. schools, prisons and universities, to actively promote “British Values”, and required a wide range of frontline professionals to work within the PREVENT agenda. PREVENT was introduced in 2007 as one strand of the UK’s overall counter terrorism policy known as CONTEST. PREVENT’s aims on the surface appear uncontroversial, namely to identify those at risk of radicalisation and extremism, and second, to prevent people from being drawn into radicalisation, extremism or terrorism. Under the 2015 Counter Terrorism act, specified organisations must have

“due regard” to these requirements, in other words, work with and implement the PREVENT policy. The UK Government’s definitions of radicalisation and extremism are as follows. Extremism is defined as the:

“Vocal or active oppositions to fundamental British Values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faith and beliefs. We also include in our definition of extremism, calls for the death of members of our armed forces, whether in this country or overseas”.

(HM Gov, 2014)

And radicalisation is defined as the:

“...process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism, committing terrorist acts either abroad or on home ground”

(HM Govt, 2014)

What has also emerged in the field is the notion of non-violent extremism. The difference between violent extremism and non-violent extremism is described as:

“Militant groups are usually the offshoot of [nonviolent] movements, and the difference ... lies not in their ideology and objective [but] in what they regard to be the appropriate strategy to achieve their aims”.

(Geelhoed, 2010:386)

It is argued therefore that those promoting non-violent extremism, have a direct relationship to those who wish to utilise violent strategies to implement a proposed ideology or political change. In terms of PREVENT, we can perhaps see the lack of a clear distinction between violent and non-violent extremism, as the policy aims more generally to prevent people from becoming radicalised and developing “extremist views” that may, or may not, lead to acts of terrorism. Indeed, this has been one of the many criticisms of PREVENT, namely that it largely operates in what McCulloch and Pickering (2009) term a “pre-crime” sphere. There are of course further issues about the need for a more precise definition of such terms, namely extremism and radicalisation. Sedgewick (2011) argues for example, that terms like extremism and radicalisation can of course, be debated. For example the term radicalisation can be used in different contexts, i.e. in three different contexts: the security context, the integration context, and the foreign-policy context. The point remains however that definitions of such terms remains somewhat problematic in terms of what it means operationally,

and how it intersects with other UK anti-terrorist legislation, namely the Terrorism Act, 2006, which updated the definition of terrorism originally found in The Terrorism Act (2000). As it can be seen, PREVENT operates in the domain of pre-crime and as suggested earlier, has been subject to significant criticism and concern.

Criticisms of PREVENT

PREVENT has been described by a wide range of people, including academics, politicians and a former senior UK police officer, as “toxic” (see for example Halliday and Dodd, 2015; Perraudin, 2016; Grice, 2017). Key political figures, for example, Baroness Warsi, the former Conservative Party Chairman has publicly branded PREVENT “toxic” (Grice, 2017) and Sir David Ormand, who was the Government’s security and intelligence co-ordinator when Prevent began, was reported to have commented:

“The key issue is, do most people in the community accept [Prevent] as protective of their rights? If the community sees it as a problem, then you have a problem.”

(Grice, 2017)

Long standing criticisms of PREVENT have centred on concerns that the policy;

- is a way to “spy” on and infiltrate Muslim communities (Kundani, 2014)
- promotes an unfounded level of suspicion centred on the Muslim population (Awan 2012)
- is simplistic in its notion of the Muslim community (Spalek, 2013)
- is based on individualistic positivistic assumptions about individuals which ignores wider structural inequalities (Coppock and McGovern, 2014).
- serves to destabilise national security rather than enhance it (Pantazias and Pemberton, 2009).
- Is based on “thin narratives” consisting of stereotypical assertions that play to public fears and are centred on “othered” populations. (McKendrick and Finch, 2016).
- challenges the traditional egalitarian, emancipatory values of the social work profession resulting in social workers working on rather than with individuals (McKendrick and Finch, 2017).
- Serves to promote and justify moral panic, and ultimately undermines social work values (Stanley and Guru, 2015)

As it can be seen criticisms of PREVENT are varied and wide ranging, focusing on the underpinning philosophy, the implementation and the practice implications of social work, being positioned in a

relatively new and under explored environment; namely social work activity in the field of counter terrorism. Sabir (2017) argues that such social work activity can be conceptualised as a form of counter insurgency whereby marginalised, frustrated and often young people are perceived by the state as potential national threats, that are subsequently responded to using a coercive approach which may serve instead to increase their disaffection, anger and frustration and having the undesired effect of making more extremist views more attractive.

We feel that such thin conceptualisations inevitably lack a thorough exploration of the “why?” In other words; why do some individuals and or families, many of whom are constructed as “other” feel such disaffection and alienation? A more pertinent approach from the state may be to consider the role of social and foreign policy, as well as domestic policy, which may all serve to increase frustration and disaffection among marginalised and detached groups. We now move on to consider the arguments that support the policy.

Proponents of PREVENT

Proponents of PREVENT, i.e. those who argue that the policy is valuable, urgently needed, and essentially benign, not surprisingly come from those who have significant investment in the promulgation and implementation of the policy. Criticisms of those who are perceived as “Preventing PREVENT” has been fierce, uncompromising and have been carried out in the public domain via the media. For example, Sara Khan, now a government counter- terrorism Tsar (a term often used in the UK to denote a government official with expertise in a particular area) and former co-founder of Inspire, a counter-extremism and women’s rights organisation that was set up in 2008, argues that:

..many Muslims organisations do not want to publicise the face that they support PREVENT....I have lost count of the number of articles, academic blogs and assumptions that are made about PREVENT...the at times lazy and uniformed debate around PREVENT is in part a result of a post-truth society.... [and] outlandish claims are published on the basis of flimsy evidence, and when a fact begins to resemble whatever you feel is true.” (Khan, 2016)

Additionally, Nazir Afzal, a former public prosecutor, who gained prominence in this role in the Rotherham children sexual exploitation court cases, has been reported as saying the PREVENT strategy has been:

“...constantly undermined by myths that urgently need to be challenged....It’s stopped at least 150 people going to Syria, 50 of them children....its grass roots, it’s not about criminalising and it has an impact” (Lusher, 2017).

As we discussed at the outset of this chapter, the debate becomes polarised between those who are critical of PREVENT, and those who feel it is necessary and without ethical blemish or concern. The space in which you can therefore constructively criticise PREVENT becomes contested. Indeed, our experiences to date, in terms of exploring the possible implications of PREVENT for social work policy and practice, has been subject to a series of strong emotional reactions. This has seen us being accused of being apologists for terrorism, part of the preventing PREVENT lobby, and as such, engaging in peddling myths, half-truths, inaccuracies and overly generalised academic, i.e. highly theorised but essentially anecdotal approach to the topic. This has manifested in a series of difficult to explain events, such as opportunities to disseminate our research via presentation being cancelled at short notice on the grounds of health and safety (thankfully not at our own institutions), an article we authored (McKendrick and Finch, 2015), disappearing from a journal’s online website for some months, without ever receiving an adequate explanation for its disappearance, and online documents (namely drafts of this chapter) being sent via file sharing applications not being received. Additionally, our own concerns with PREVENT appears to have been perceived by some as risky, and certainly not based on the realities of practice. As social work academics however, interested more generally in the interface of governmental policy and social work practice, we should critically explore all policies that impact on social work policy and practice, and more importantly on the people we serve. PREVENT therefore, is one policy amongst many others but given, the relative “newness” of the duty to have regard to the PREVENT agenda, the lack of an evidence base, and given the strength of pre-existing concerns raised by academics from other discipline areas, this to us, justifies the need to critically explore this policy further. As we have consistently argued, we need to move beyond the binary debate of for, or against PREVENT, and seek to recognise the policies difficult contours, ethical challenges and moral ambiguities, towards a more nuanced, understanding of the complexities inherent in the application of this policy in practice, using research from other disciplines when needed. Indeed, we need to hold in our minds two positions which are not contradictory, or an either or, namely the need for counter terrorism work, to protect all citizens, alongside concern that the current policy has implications for social work that are not comfortable and indeed could be potentially damaging to social work in the long term. It is clear therefore, that whilst terrorism and counter-terrorism is studied in a range of other disciplines, for example, psychology, criminology and terrorists studies to name but a few, it remains a contested and controversial field. What is clear however is that social work policy and practice in this area, in both the UK and elsewhere, is currently

under developed, under theorised and there is limited, if any empirical research about what is , or should be good practice in this area. As we argued elsewhere, there is a concerning policy, practice and research vacuum which if not appropriately filled, could result in deleterious and oppressive social work practice (McKendrick and Finch, 2017). Unless there is a more dispersed and granular approach towards this policy, what may result is the coercive application of a restrictive and oppressive form of social work practice. This of course, could be viewed as not anything different from the existing challenges of social work, namely, the balancing of the care vs control function, or as Neocleous (2007), a contemporary political theorist positions it, the “liberty-security” balance. We would contend however, that PREVENT marks a significant and decisive shift from care/liberty to control/security with an accompanying development of what we have termed elsewhere, a system of “securitised welfare” (McKendrick and Finch, 2017) and which we discuss here further. In other words, we are concerned how the normal practices of traditional welfare safeguarding have been co-opted and incorporated into the lexicon of counter terrorism work, and indeed, wish to articulate the danger that “safeguarding” becomes synonymous with counter terrorism work.

The Appropriation of Safeguarding

In the UK, the term safeguarding, which has largely replaced “child protection” as the term previously term utilised by social work and other professionals. Safeguarding is also used in adult social work, social care and health settings, where there are concerns about adults. The term safeguarding, nonetheless, has long standing and clear welfare connotations. We became increasingly aware how the term “safeguarding” has been appropriated by various government politicians for firstly, use in counter terrorism work, and secondly, being deliberately used to legitimise and justify excursion into counter terrorism and state security work. Of course, an obvious limitation in setting out such a claim, is that pre-PREVENT, safeguarding and child protection, was some sort of golden age of neutral state intervention and care. Indeed, there has been a long history of concern that social workers are nothing more than agents of the state seeking to control the populace, and, at best, the role is to prevent people from succumbing to the worst impacts of capitalism (Davies, 1994). More recently though, writers such as Featherstone et al (2016), Gupta and Blumhardt (2016) have expressed increasing concern about austerity and poverty, and its impact on individuals and society, not least increasing the chances of significant state intervention in family lives. Recent research by Paul Bywaters et al (2017), for example, shows starkly the correlation between poverty, austerity and increased chances of children and young people being in state care. These writers are therefore suggesting that social work has become far from emancipatory or empowering.

Returning however to the issue of the appropriation of the term safeguarding, which we have referred elsewhere as a conflationary linguistic device (McKendrick and Finch, 2015), was, and remains in our view, a deliberate tactic, to both substantiate and validate caring and emancipatory professions entry into counter terrorism work. For example, we noted a UK government minister's numerous proclamation about the links between counter terrorism work and repeated references to safeguarding. The official in question, the former security and Northern Ireland minister James Brokenshire for example, stated:

“One particular interest of mine is the importance of ensuring that our counter radicalisation strategy sits alongside other key areas of public sector work. I think it's important that we articulate our counter radicalisation strategy within the context of safeguarding”.

(Gov.Uk, 2013)

We noticed the term safeguarding used in relation counter radicalisation and extremism being increasingly noticeable in governments ministers' speeches and policy pronouncements. Indeed, in May 2016, mention was made of a Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill in the Queen's Speech¹ (Dawson and Godec, 2017) although as the Guardian newspaper reported, the Bill was not pursued because of legal and definitional problems around the term “extremism, “non-violent extremism” and “British Values”, which ran the risk of bringing an unacceptable level of scrutiny to many law abiding citizens (Townsend, 2017).

The point remains however that the legitimising impact of such work being “just safeguarding” rather than national security work is becoming ever more persistent. For example, we noted at a social care conference panel discussion on PREVENT that took place in London, 2015, the key message from a home office discussant, namely that “radicalisation was a part of the same safeguarding agenda as other preventative work done by social workers” (Stevenson, 2015). As we explore later on, safeguarding in this arena, certainly feels very different from what we have previously termed, traditional forms of “welfare safeguarding” (McKendrick and Finch, 2017). The chapter now moves on to consider securitisation theory, which, as we will argue is a useful explanatory framework to critically appraise current UK social policy directives that impact decisively on social work in the UK, before returning to the issue of securitised safeguarding.

¹ The state opening of Parliament in the UK, formally mark the new session of Parliament. The current monarchy therefore opens parliament with a speech detailing plans for new legislation and policy.

Securitisation Theory

Securitisation theory derives largely from the academic discipline of international relations. It's most noted proponents are Buzan, Waever and De Wilde (1998) also known as the Copenhagen School. In brief, securitisation theory, rather than focus on traditional international relations exploration of what constitutes a security threat, with a focus on military capability etc., focuses instead on the process of threat formation and maintenance. In other words, securitisation theory focuses on the process by which a state actor, using "speech acts" transforms a matter into an issue of security. Security therefore is a discursive process, whereby politicians, using speech acts, construct a threat, which usually leads to the enactment of emergency or special measures to deal with the "threat" (Wodak and Boukala. As Balzacq (2005) argues, securitisation is thus a:

"rule-governed practice, the success of which does not necessarily depend on the existence of a real threat, but on the discursive ability to effectively endow a development with such a specific complexion"

(Balzacq, 2005:179)

Additionally, securitisation processes involve four components:

- A securitizing actor/agent: an entity that makes the securitizing move/statement;
- An existential threat: an object (or ideal) that has been identified as potentially harmful;
- A referent object: an object (or ideal) that is being threatened and needs to be protected;
- An audience: the target of the securitization act that needs to be persuaded and accept the issue as a security threat.

(Buzan et al, 1998:36)

We can see this starkly in terms of various Western countries responses to terrorist attacks. France for example, is still in a state of emergency since the Nice attacks in November 2015. In the UK, in the wake of the 7/7 terrorist attacks in London, we saw numerous declarations from the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, about Britain's very values being under attack. For example, he argued that:

"Isis poses an existential threat to the British way of life and Britain cannot hide from this threat".

(Cameron, 2015)

We see this repeated in a range of government announcements, and indeed, in international contexts. Teresa May, at the time of writing, the UK's Prime Minister, in the wake of the London Bridge terrorist attack in June 2017 proclaimed:

“It is time to say enough is enough. Everybody needs to go about their lives as they normally would. Our society should continue to function in accordance with our values. But when it comes to taking on extremism and terrorism, things need to change.” (Gov.Uk, 2017)

A hard line therefore emerges therefore, where people's rights are gradually curtailed and the normal rules of justice relaxed, in order to manage this existential threat, seen for example by the use of control orders. Again, we are not arguing that the terrorist threat is without validity, but rather, that the threat construction is exaggerated and particular “othered” communities are seen as increasingly problematic, and a threat to so called “mainstream” society.

Securitisation, Social work and Safeguarding

Whilst derived from international relation studies, we feel that securitisation theory has much to offer social work policy and practice, in terms of being a critical lens within which to explore not only the underpinning ideology of current policy directives and practices, either internationally, as in the case of traditional securitisation theory which explores international security relations, but also domestic UK policies and practices. Additionally, it is potentially illuminating for social workers to see how threats are created and constructed and the resulting policy discourses that emerge. Such a framework can also help us understand how it is the case that a rights based, emancipatory profession such as social work, and indeed other “caring” professions in the UK, has become legally mandated to counter terrorism? Hence what we see in the UK in social work more generally has been a shift towards risk averse practices more generally. Indeed Fergusson (2008) argues for example, that social work policy has seen a decisive shift, away from generalised notions of welfare towards more risk averse, personalised and individualistic approaches which views the recipient of social work services, through a neo-liberal gaze. In other words, individuals are seen as disconnected from wider societal structures and risk therefore, becomes transferred to the state to the individual. This is seen most readily Fergusson (2008) argues in personalisation policies but also in policies like PREVENT, that focus on individual acts without consideration of wider structural factors, disadvantage and inequalities (Coppock and McGovern, 2014).

As we discussed earlier, the appropriation of safeguarding into the lexicon of counter terrorism language and activities, is a normalisation process that in our view is deliberate and considered. By utilising strategies of rhetorical linguistic devices, the ethical dilemmas that are inevitably raised by counter terrorism work become down played. Indeed, an argument that such activities, are “just safeguarding” is not something to accept at face value. We are making the argument therefore, that this new era raises the spectre of a new form of state social work, namely one of securitised safeguarding rather than a traditional, and whilst not exactly benign, welfare safeguarding.

Implications for social work policy and practice.

This discussion therefore leads to an important question about what is currently, and what should the social work professions role be in counter-terrorism, be it in the UK and further afield?. The question was raised at the outset of the chapter as to whether social work as a profession, whilst legally mandated to carry out such work should indeed, be engaging in such activities? It could be argued therefore, that social work can never be anything other than agents of the state, carrying out the state’s work, so by extension, focusing on preventing violent extremism and working with counter terrorism officers, should not be seen as anything new, merely as a natural and logical development.

It was interesting to note that we were challenged once at a conference, to explain more why this policy was indeed something new and decisive (and indeed negative) in the history of social work in the UK. Our response was (and is) that social work has silently slipped into anti-radicalisation work which poses distinct ethical dilemmas, not least how far peoples differing ideological views and beliefs may serve to put someone at risk, or indeed, in a family context, cause “significant harm” to children, the threshold at which the state is mandated to intervene in private life in the UK. Such work therefore could entail, assessing the extent to which a child in a given family is at risk from significant harm because of their parents/carers political or ideological beliefs, identifying and stopping children and young people from going to Middle East zones, to partake in war or indeed, in a well-publicised case, marry Jihadi soldiers and working to stop young people being radicalised. Key questions remain however, not least the consideration as to whether this is indeed safeguarding work, like any other safeguarding work.

A further issue to consider, is that having delved into some of the Terrorism and Critical Terrorism Studies literature, what is clear, is what we have termed elsewhere as “thin narratives” about the causes of radicalisation and extremism, are indeed just that, i.e. thin and the reality is a considerably more complex. Horgan (2009) for example, makes the important point that there is no one root cause

to explain involvement in terrorism, and that often thinking about terrorism is “rooted in age-old assumptions which are proven unfounded, impractical and devoid of empirical support” (2009:1). A similar point is made by PISOIU and HAIN, (2018) who argue that Terrorism and Critical Terrorism Studies are often based on a series of untested theories and assumptions. What is also clear from some of the terrorist studies literature is that whilst there are lots of theories about why people become radicalised and the process of radicalisation, what is not clear is the profile of those at risk of being radicalised and which individuals go on to commit terrorist atrocities (Sageman, 2014; Koomen and Van Der Pligt, 2016). Indeed this was the conclusion reached by a government report into the 7th July bombings in London, namely that there was not a consistent profile of the bombers to predict who was at risk of radicalisation in the future (Gov.Uk 2006). Emerson, who was the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, raised a similar concern, namely that there existed dominant narratives about radicalisation which were based on a “fixed trajectory of identifiable markers” (Emmerson, 2016). Indeed, the governments training on PREVENT and associated documents, seem to us to provide thin explanations for highly complex phenomena and promotes a particular narrative about who is at risk from radicalisation that does not always accord with the terrorist studies research, or indeed reality.

So returning to the question of how should social work engage and practice in this area, recognising the ethical dilemmas, debates and lack of empirical evidence we perceive a number of challenges. Initially we would identify a lack of critical exploration of the advance of counter radicalisation work as being best located in the public sector. We advance concerns over the surveillance creep elements of this and the impact it is likely to have on the formation of relationships built on trust, respect and mutual understanding. We are aware of the potential for the social work profession being co-opted into forms of securitised safeguarding without there being sufficient discussion, awareness and debate around the implications of this. Finally, we are concerned that in a climate that is highly febrile and often on a high alert status response to issues around countering extremism become obscured in a fog or risk and concern over emotive topics such as terrorism and violence.

Concluding Comments

Social work is rightly proud of its traditions of social justice, emancipation and concerns over oppression and discrimination. This tradition has been long in the making and has faced significant challenges from governments, ideologies and policy. We see PREVENT and its lead into securitised

practice as a further example of this kind of challenge. Our view is that there exists an urgent need for debate, discussion and argument on this particular policy as, for us, its implications are far reaching and of significant concern. It is our hope that this chapter advances this cause and continues to encourage a professional and academic commitment to critical and radical debate.

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