

Preventing Violent Extremism through community work: essentialism and manipulation

(Essay for Postgraduate Diploma in Community Education course,
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Community work has long been recognised as consisting of both emancipatory and oppressive practice. Its roots in Colonial pacification of ‘the natives’ are well recognised (Mayo 1975; Vasoo 2008). Yet it has equally formed a core part of anti-sexist, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist activism (Hilliard & Weise 2002; Gilchrist et al. 2003; Tett 2006). These reactionary/progressive tendencies within community work are manifestations of the dialectic within ‘community’, the contradiction between ‘community as policy’ and ‘community as politics’ (Shaw 2008). This dialectic is evident within contemporary debate over the UK government’s ‘Preventing Violent Extremism’ (PVE) agenda.

The PVE agenda is part of the British state’s counter terrorism strategy, whose policies explicitly focus on ‘the Muslim community’, education institutions, and community work. Predictably, PVE is highly controversial and has drawn criticism from across the political spectrum. What is less predictable is the rejection of PVE funding by an increasing number of community organisations, despite their desperate lack of alternative funding. At the heart of this rejection is recognition of the dangers of ‘community as policy’.

This essay focuses on the PVE agenda, and how its policies affect community work. PVE is first outlined with examples from a range of policy documents. The ways in which PVE incorporates community work into the wider counter terrorism strategy are then explored. Following sections explain how incorporation into counter terrorism affects community work; how ‘community’ is constructed, which aspects of community work practice are emphasised, and how this re-shapes community work overall.

PVE

The Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) agenda forms one part of the UK Government’s wider counter terrorism strategy, ‘CONTEST’, and relates to the Terrorism Act 2006 (TA2006). Active since 2003, CONTEST involves four main strands of counter terrorism work; what the government refers to as the Pursue,

Prevent, Protect, and Prepare ‘workstreams’ (HMG 2009). PVE stems from the Prevent workstream, the main concern of which is ‘stopping people becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremism’ (HMG 2009: 55). The TA2006 extended earlier legislation to make ‘encouraging’ or ‘glorifying’ terrorism a criminal offence, which transformed the Prevent stream of CONTEST from advice into a statutory duty of local authorities.

The PVE delivery strategy paper states that ‘[t]he most severe terrorist threat currently comes from individuals and groups who distort Islam to attempt to justify murder and their attacks on our shared values’ (HMG 2008: 3). The paper outlines 6 six key priorities for ‘preventative’ work:

- Undermine extremist ideology and support mainstream voices
- Disrupt those who promote violent extremism, and strengthen vulnerable institutions
- Support individuals who are vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremists
- Increase the capacity of communities to challenge and resist violent extremists
- Effectively address grievances
- Developing understanding, analysis and information and improving strategic communications

Each of these priority areas for PVE delivery explicitly focuses on preventing ‘Muslims’ in Britain becoming violent extremists. The government explicitly encourages ‘Multi-agency partnerships’ for this preventative work, in which local government authorities and police take the lead, while engaging statutory and voluntary organisations, ‘arts and cultural delivery bodies’, schools, colleges and universities, prison and probationary services, and youth justice programmes (HMG 2008a). Since 2007 the government has issued PVE guidance to universities, schools, third sector organisations, and Further Education colleges (DIUS 2007; DCSF 2008; HMG 2008a; DIUS 2009, 2009a). While this partnership approach to counter terrorism applies to each of the priority areas above, the fourth priority area explicitly relates to community work.

Priority four of the PVE strategy focuses on working with Muslim community leaders, Muslim youth and Muslim women, stating that ‘[c]ohesive, empowered and resilient communities are best equipped to confront violent extremists and support the most vulnerable individuals’ (HMG 2008: 7). The Department for Communities and

Local Government (DCLG) has been the primary driver of PVE since 2007, when it began providing funding to local authorities through the ‘Preventing Violent Extremism Pathfinder Fund’ (PVEPF). This is targeted funding for multi-agency local projects, administered by local authorities, and awarded predominantly to third sector organisations that explicitly combat both extremist conduct and ideologies within Muslim communities.

The DCLG also started the ‘Community Leadership Fund’ (CLF) in April 2008, which is offered directly to third sector community organisations. The aim of this fund is ‘to support work that will build the capacity of individuals, organisations and communities to take the lead on tackling violent extremist influences’ (DCLG 2008: 3). The CLF prioritises five areas of voluntary and charitable work;

- Capacity of organisations and communities
- Supporting Muslim young people
- Supporting Muslim women
- Capacity of Muslim faith leaders
- Local forums against extremism and Islamophobia

Thus the PVE agenda is a national government strategy that has a distinct partnership and governance approach to counter terrorism. It involves multiple agencies, across the statutory, charitable and voluntary sectors, in reporting and enforcing the criminal offences identified under the Terrorism Act 2006. While the actors most impacted upon by the PVE agenda are clearly Muslim people, PVE also has an impact on the processes and purposes of all of the agencies within its scope. The emergence of specific PVE funding for third sector community organisations is of particular significance to Islamic community organisations, but is also highly relevant to the community work field in general. For PVE discourse clearly borrows from community development, and is rooted in the community participation and engagement agenda that predates the current terrorism context.

Community work and PVE

The PVE agenda incorporates significant aspects of community work into its discourse, frequently referring to ‘capacity building’, ‘community engagement’ and

‘community cohesion’ as central processes in the battle against Islamic terrorism. Throughout the PVE delivery strategy, the key aim of the overall agenda is spelled out in terms of building the resilience of the Muslim community, building the capacity of individual Muslims to challenge extremism, and engaging the Muslim community in partnership work. The £6million of CLG funds that went into the PEVPF between 2007-08 was specifically for community work in its community engagement form. This is set to continue, with part of the £45million for 2008/9-2010/11 that has recently been announced as part of the Prevent strategy going towards the Community Leadership Fund (alongside increased Police numbers and training) (HMG 2009).

This incorporation of community work into state policy is nothing new, and is arguably symptomatic of the current context in which traditional boundaries between the public and private, state and non-state sectors, have been increasingly eroded. It could be argued that the PVE agenda simply follows in the footsteps of community planning and community safety. These are both examples where government decision-making authority is regularly devolved to multi-agency partnerships whose membership spans civil society organisations and state institutions. Debates that have emerged over community capacity building, participation and engagement are therefore highly relevant to any consideration of the impacts of the PVE agenda on community work.

Capacity building, participation and engagement

Craig’s (2007) assessment of community capacity building (CCB) is revealing of the risks in ‘spraying on’ the term community to government policy initiatives. Illustrating the diverse interpretations of both ‘community’ and ‘capacity building’, Craig criticises the role and proliferation of CCB in Britain today. He argues that CCB is largely the community development approach from the 1970s, that it hides a top-down politics with a bottom-up discourse, and that it obscures the fact that ‘[c]ommunities have skills, ideas, capacities; but these are often latent or unacknowledged’ (2007: 353). Craig concludes that CCB is an amalgamation of community development with other agendas, and that ‘manipulation of communities, misappropriation of terminology, co-option of activists, conditional funding, and

state-controlled power games such as divide and rule' are all too prevalent (2007: 354).

Cornwall's (2008) discussion of participation offers several typologies. She first highlights Arnstein's ladder of participation, which ranges from Non participation, to Tokenism, to Citizen Power (2008: 270). Cornwall then offers Pretty's typology, which ranges from Manipulative, to Functional, to Interactive, to Self-mobilising forms of participation (2008: 272). Arguing that the approaches of both Arnstein and Pretty are too normative, Cornwall offers another model from White, which is less a typology and more of an unpicking of the interests involved within different forms of participation. White highlights the importance of considering what participation means to 'the implementing agency' as compared to 'those on the receiving end', which can then inform a judgement of whether a particular form of participation is for display, gives people a voice, or is a continuing dynamic (2008: 273).

In Cowden and Singh's (2007) consideration of health and social care service user involvement in the UK, they describe the historic rise of user engagement in Britain, and how user 'power' is translated into 'choice' (2007: 6). Highly critical of the contemporary form of 'user involvement', Cowden & Singh argue that consumer choice is the dominant form public participation in health and social care today; this 'privileges high visibility and high take-up without any serious consideration of the underlying social relations involved' (2007: 15). They conclude by summarising that when business management culture is the dominant form of participation it becomes 'far easier to frame service users as consultants rather than activists' (2007: 20).

Reflecting on the increasing prominence of civil society in government policy, Hodgson (2004) uses the concept of 'manufactured civil society' to describe 'groups that are formed and funded, at least initially, through some type of state initiative' (2004: 145). She highlights dangers in state-sponsored civil society, where partnership between groups is increasingly artificial, forced through conditional funding. Hodgson offers a comparison between Informal, Formal and Manufactured forms of civil society that exposes 'the centralizing [sic] tendencies of the state', which she argues stifles (2004: 159). The danger Hodgson highlights is that manufactured civil

society will not offer the much needed public counterbalance to the state in a democracy that a more 'organic development' of voluntary organisation offers.

Bannister et al. (2006) argue a similar point about the need for civility to be balanced by incivility – in the context of anti-social behaviour and the Respect agenda. Considering how contemporary urban planning 'has destroyed the sites of social gathering necessary for the citizenry as a whole' (2006: 923), they argue that a lack of community cohesion can be attributed to the commercialisation of public space. Describing the contemporary social context as one where 'the only 'civilised encounters' that people are familiar with are those of exchange' (2006: 933), Bannister et al. highlight that much anti-social behaviour is stifled public opposition to the status quo. There is clearly an urgent public need for space to dissent.

These observations concerning community capacity building, participation and engagement are extremely useful in assessing the impact of PVE on community work, and in considering the implications not only for Muslim people (the principle targets of the PVE agenda), but also for British society at large. Following the sequence of questioning offered above, it is essential to recognise;

- a) the concepts of 'community' and 'capacity building' that are constructed in PVE policy discourse
- b) the form of participation and engagement that PVE multi-agency working promotes
- c) the type of civil society that PVE engages with

Exploring each of these factors will inform how community work itself is being re-constructed through the PVE agenda, and ultimately will expose wider political implications.

Constructions of community and PVE

Each PVE policy document begins with a statement that only a minority of people support Islamic terrorism. Yet consistent references to a supposedly homogenous 'Muslim community' throughout these documents construct static notions of Islamic identity, and essentialist notions of the millions of people in Britain who define

themselves as Muslim, which is akin to notions of 'race'. While the Al Qa'ida network is identified as the current threat to national security, 'The Muslim community' is posed as the *potential* threat.

The racist ignorance that underpins this concept of community is obvious. Many community work practitioners did away with essentialist, prescriptive notions of community a long time ago, recognising the socially constructed and political nature of 'community' (Martin 1993, 2003; Brent 2004; Tett 2006; Shaw 2008). In utilising a racist hybrid of community of place and community of interest (Tett 2006: 1), the PVE agenda not only constructs the community of engagement, but also constructs the nature of engagement. As Craig (2007) highlighted, when community is used unproblematically, it is easier to construct 'the community' as unskilled, unthinking and without capacities. 'Young Muslim Voices', a London-based youth project, also points out that '[u]sing the umbrella term 'the Muslim community' does not adequately represent the diversity of ethnicities and experiences of the many Muslim communities and can lead to decision makers assuming that there are 'spokespeople' for the whole community that can speak for everyone' (YMV 2009: 18). PVE indeed thus criminalises all Muslims through a deficit discourse that exclusively positions Muslim children, women and men as potential terrorists, and picks out 'community leaders' to speak for the 'whole community'.

Participation and engagement in the PVE agenda

The forms of participation and engagement evident in PVE multi-agency partnerships relate specifically to the deficit discourse of PVE's capacity building approach. Constructed as 'vulnerable' and incapable of independent 'resilience' to extremism, Muslims are not to be engaged on their own terms, but on those of the state. At best, PVE partnerships follow the trend of contemporary community engagement approaches in the public service sector; in the words of Cowden & Singh (2007), Muslim community organisations are consultant partners, rather than active leaders of partnerships. At worst, PVE partnerships act as intelligence gathering units. As Preston councillor Michael Lavelette recently commented, PVE community engagement is about 'obtaining surveillance' and 'turns [community leaders] into an arm of the security services' (Lavelette 2009). This is echoed by An-Nisa Society, a

London-based Muslim women's organisation; '[PVE] is not only stigmatising all British Muslims, it is placing the entire Muslim community under surveillance in every area of their lives and further alienating the very community the government needs to have on board as an ally' (An-Nisa Society 2009: 11).

It is clear that PVE partnerships would rate as non-participatory to tokenistic on Arnstein's ladder, as manipulative to functional in Pretty's typology. White's relativist approach would show that PVE partnership is not merely for display purposes, and surely involves some dynamic between previously excluded groups and the state. But the increasingly public responses to the PVE agenda from Muslim organisations show that these partnerships are clearly more empowering for the implementing agencies than those on the receiving end (FOSIS 2009; An-Nisa Society 2009, 2009a).

Civil society and PVE

In Hodgson's terms, the form of civil society that the PVE agenda constructs is fundamentally manufactured. The PVE Pathfinder Fund and the Community Leadership Fund both mould community projects in the British state's image, primarily into extended surveillance units. Clear dividing lines have also been constructed between legitimate and illegitimate civil society organisations, with legitimacy based on compliance with state priorities. As Kundnani (2008) points out, the shift in government favour from The Muslim Council of Britain to The Sufi Muslim Council in 2006 'was clearly political in that the MCB had gradually become more critical of government policy after 9/11 and was therefore no longer deemed to be a reliable ally in the 'war on terror' (2008: 55).

Bannister et al.'s discussion of civility and incivility is also relevant here. In a context where 'the Muslim community' is constructed as anti-social, PVE community engagement is clearly about building consensus around CONTEST rather than empowering communities. Muslims are constructed as in-civil people who need civilising. Ambiguous notions of 'British values' and essentialist notions of what it means to be British run throughout PVE policy documents; PVE community work is

about helping Muslims embrace this British identity rather than the ‘extremist’ forms of identity offered within the Muslim community.

Community work re-shaped

From the considerations above it is clear that PVE shapes community work along national security priorities. An essentialist notion of community, combined with the deficit discourse surrounding this community, has significant implications for community participation and engagement. The contemporary trend of interpreting community empowerment as community consultation is evident throughout the multi-agency partnerships prescribed by PVE policy – in practice, local partners that oppose the PVE strategy have either been ignored or rejected in favour of more compliant partners. PVE funding has significant impact on third sector community work, prescribing not only the means of engagement, but the community of engagement. The discriminatory nature of PVE funding is increasingly being recognised not as positive, but divisive. Hence, an increasing number of organisations are publicly rejecting PVE funding. They clearly see ‘community as policy’ (Shaw 2008) as as much of a threat to national security as terrorist violence. The challenge to community work that these organisations offer is that of developing a version of community as politics that rejects the racism that the counter terrorism context ferments.

Implications for community work in Scotland

The majority of the examples I have referred to earlier are specific to England. For example, the Community Leadership Fund is exclusively for projects within England. Although national security is not a devolved issue, PVE developments in Scotland have been different. While Police in Scotland are briefing Neighbourhood Partnerships on the PVE agenda¹ (ECCNP 2009: 3), the PVE strategy has only recently been rolled out. The Scottish PVE Unit gave their first community briefing (exclusively for ‘faith and belief community representatives’) in April 2009 (SPVEU 2009 – see appendix 1). Another significant difference from England is that the Scottish government’s PVE strategy seems to be embedded within their national ‘race equality’ strategy. The government’s Race Equality Statement has one section on ‘Security’ that reads:

events such as 7/7 and the Glasgow Airport attack have created a very different environment for all of our communities. Issues of security impact on community relations and so not only do we need to tackle violent extremism, from whatever source, but we need to engage communities in that work. We share a common goal in tackling terrorism and in building the resilience of our communities.

(SG 2008: 3)

The Scottish PVE Unit is also embedded within the Scottish Government Equality Unit, the author of this statement.

This implies that the Scottish Government has taken an even more explicitly racialised approach to terrorism than the UK government. In this context, the challenge to community workers of combating racist notions of community, and the inevitable consequences, is even more acute in Scotland.

¹ See agenda item 2.6 'National Security' on the Edinburgh City Centre Neighbourhood Partnership minutes for 26 March 2009.

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Appendix 1

INVITATION TO SCOTTISH FAITH AND BELIEF COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES

CONTEST: A PRESENTATION BY THE SCOTTISH PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM UNIT

TUESDAY 14 APRIL 2009 IN EDINBURGH

CONTEST is a long-term strategy for countering international terrorism. Its aim is to reduce the risk from international terrorism, so that people can go about their daily lives freely and with confidence. It is a UK-wide strategy with which is divided into four principal strands: Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare. This event is to allow faith and belief community representatives to hear about how this work is being taken forward in Scotland. The event will be delivered by the Scottish Preventing Violent Extremism Unit (SPVU).

When and where:

Date:	14 April 2009
Day:	Tuesday
Arrival time:	You can arrive any time between 13:00 (1 PM) and 14:00 (2 PM). Refreshments will be available from 13:00 (1 PM).
Event start time:	14:00 (2 PM)
Event finish time:	17:00 (5 PM)
Venue:	The Scottish Government Conference Room 1 Victoria Quay Edinburgh EH6 6QQ

Who should attend:

- All representatives of faith and belief communities in Scotland.
- Those who directly represent a faith and/or belief community.
- Those who work for faith and/or belief based organisations.
- Those who represent specific groups within a faith and/or belief community – for example women or children.

Booking a place:

Places to attend the event are limited and will be allocated on a first come, first served basis. We expect there to be a high level of interest in this event so advise you to book early to ensure you are allocated a place. The attached booking form can be used to reserve a place.

PLEASE CIRCULATE THIS INVITATION WIDELY