

Connected Communities

Conflict with and between communities:
Exploring the role of communities in helping to
defeat and/or endorse terrorism and the
interface with policing efforts to counter
terrorism

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Executive Summary

This initial scoping study seeks to examine conflict within and between communities – with respect to the role of communities in helping to defeat and/or endorse terrorism and the interface with policing efforts to counter terrorism. The research highlights the tension created by often simplified notions of community from policy perspectives, in contrast to the complexity of community as defined and experienced by members. Key findings build around the notion of ‘connectors’, who stand at the intersections of the different communities involved in the counter-terrorism arena, and whose complex positionalities illustrate both the challenges of community connections, and the possibility for change and conflict transformation.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Key words

Counter-terrorism; community; positionality; intersectionality

Introduction

Aims and methodology

This scoping study sought to explore conceptual frameworks, perceptions and lived experiences in relation to conflict within and between communities – with respect to the role of communities in helping to defeat and/or endorse terrorism and the interface with policing efforts to counter terrorism.

The aim was threefold:

1. to carry out a systematic review of the extensive, multi-disciplinary literature relating to the role of communities in relation to security, terrorism and political violence;
2. to identify and consult experts with an understanding of these issues in the UK context through an advisory board, focus groups and in-depth qualitative interviews;
3. and, through an analysis of the literature and our preliminary data, identify key areas and grounded research questions for future studies.

The initial stage, that of the literature review, produced a number of clear thematic trends on which the subsequent primary research and consultancy was guided. In particular, it became clear that the definitions of community and the assumptions made about the roles of community members in supporting or preventing political violence appeared to be framed differently according to perspective. The differences were broadly split, in some cases binarized, between those of the state – including security practitioners and policy makers – and those of communities subject to scrutiny within the counter-terrorism arena.

The literature also allowed us to identify a more specific focus for the research topic, with regards to which communities we wished to include in the consultative process. The UK counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST 2 and its associated policy documents provided an explicit state perspective in which communities are considered key to countering terrorism and violent extremism. The 'war on terror' since 9/11 has created an intense focus particularly on Muslim communities in Britain, but historically and even at present other communities have been identified by the state as connected to security, including Irish communities associated with Republican violence, and English white working class and far right violence. It was therefore important to include members from such communities, who from and their connections and interactions with other communities – including the conceptual, the geographical and institutional provided the focus for the consultative process.

The individuals who participated in the consultative phase were thus identified as reflective of state and grassroots communities and their multiple perspectives, connected

to each other within the British counter-terrorism context. This grouping included Muslim community members, community workers involved with countering far-right extremism, police and probation officers, policy makers, academics, and key individuals working within institutional communities explicitly identified as relevant by counter-terrorism policy: prisons and universities.

This report aims to provide an overview of the key themes and findings arising from the analysis of the literature and research data, illustrating the complexities of the subject and raising questions pertinent for future research.

Context: Perceptions of community and counter-terrorism

Counter-terrorism policy, both nationally in the UK and internationally across the US, Canada, Netherlands and other regions, incorporates an explicit notion of community. From these state policy orientated perspectives, community is both object and subject: as object communities are problematised and targeted by state policies and practices that place nation state security over community concerns; as subject because the security maxim 'communities defeat terrorism' creates, demands and recognizes the active participation of community members in both the prevention and support of terrorism and political violence.

Historically, counter-terrorism policies and practices have been dominated by state-led approaches that have placed nation state security above that of the security and other needs of communities. Thus, it has not been a priority to gain the consent of communities regarding various counter-terrorism practices such as the use of surveillance or informants, and traditionally the impact of counter-terrorism strategies on targeted communities has not been regarded as an issue of significance. For the police, this legacy creates particular challenges because the lack of visibility and accessibility of counter-terrorism policing can affect the legitimacy and accountability of their services, not only in relation to counter-terrorism policing but also in relation to all aspects of policing.

However, recently, innovative and new community-focussed counter-terrorism policing efforts have emerged, which try to build face-to-face relationships between police officers and local communities, as this is seen as one of the most important layers of public accountability. These partnerships are said to provide police with important cultural and linguistic insights, vital information and cooperation, and informed observations that can become part of a productive strategy for terror crime prevention. At the same time, these partnerships are said to help to ensure the mitigation of damage to communities that results from 'hard' policing strategies, and they also purportedly enable for hate crimes to be effectively investigated and prosecuted (Ramirez, 2008; Lambert, 2010; Spalek, 2010).

Furthermore, research (Spalek et al 2012) suggests that within the counter-terrorism context, communities have created spaces to enable actions that go beyond reaction

and response to state-led concepts and practices. Examples from across the globe, including Egypt, Northern Ireland, the US and the UK illustrate the development of community approaches in which members become active leaders in instigating forms of counter-terrorism – better described as conflict transformation – as well as the delivery of outcomes, critically engaging from a clearly defined community framework as well as actively questioning and scrutinising counter-terrorism policies and practices.

These multiple perspectives result in a large number of ways in which community is understood as having a role to play in state and human security, at any time viewed in relation to political violence as:

- the social context, history and background
- the physical and geographical setting and space
- a conscious grouping relating to a 'cause'
- directly affected victims
- involving networks of relations and information which may be useful to promoting or countering terrorism
- directly involved in prevention or promotion through passivity, active support and/or active engagement.

Crucially, these understandings rest on a clearly defined notion of community, with identifiable memberships and networks of relations. From such a perspective, our study would appear as an attempt to understand the ways in which individuals and groups travel between and through each community, and how each bounded community comes into contact with another, for example the contact between universities and police concerned about the potential violent radicalisation of university students, who in turn may also be members of religious, ethnic or geographical communities.

However, other parts of the literature, particularly post-structural, post-modernist and feminist work, highlights the complexity, fluidity and transient nature of community and community membership, as well as its intense subjectivity and experiential nature. This was reflected through the deep and complex responses to our research ideas during the consultative phase. Participants repeatedly questioned definitions of community, and described the links, connections and gaps not groupings connecting in a linear fashion, as a Venn diagram may illustrate, but in far more nuanced ways. Communities were at any one time experienced not just in a social and functional way but in emotional, spiritual and imagined ways, which crossed other boundaries. When we try to understand communities as engaging and connecting with each other in the counter-terrorism context, the *intersections* become fundamentally important.

Our analysis has therefore attempted to embrace the instability and complexity of community: to attempt to identify the multiple intersections, and how these may be experienced at the individual and group levels, and to trace the connections from these points. From a theoretical perspective the notion of positionality has therefore been extremely helpful – as Harre and Van Langenhove (1991) suggest, we are able to understand connections and intersections to a far greater extent by foregoing the neat categories which view the complex individual interacting with neatly defined social

aggregates. This is reflected in the key findings, in which we have outlined the importance of 'gatekeepers' or the community members whose social interactions and positionalities create the connections, and allow for the multiple roles and forms of engagement between communities in the counter-terrorism context.

Key Findings

There are numerous themes and questions arising from this study, but the following represent six key findings arising repeatedly during the data analysis, which help define new ways of understanding community connections and interactions within the counter-terrorism arena.

- When exploring the connections between communities in the counter-terrorism arena, it is vital to understand how the connections are created and identified. For example, state policy creates connections between universities, Muslim students and security policing, which may then be experienced by particular members of those communities. State conceptions of community therefore intersect with actual forms of engagement, shaping the kind of connections made and experienced.
- Power relations between communities, particularly relating to the relations between state and citizens are highly influential but also fluid. In the context of partnership, vulnerable communities, whose relationship with the state may often be defined by suspicion and forms of violence, can in some cases transform the connections, developing new ways to prevent and diffuse violence from within communities. Their relationships with the state and other communities therefore shift, from suspects to 'heros'. The connections between communities and the power relations inherent within them are therefore transient and subject to change. This suggests that relations may be developed for the better – in the security arena and its associated challenges, this represents the possibility of improved dynamics particularly between state and the grassroots.
- In the security context, the word community often appears loosely defined, yet assumes on narrow interpretations of membership and boundaries. Communities are, from different perspectives, considered responsible for the creation and sustaining of terrorism, and in part for the prevention. In contrast, our preliminary research identified the importance of key individuals rather than whole communities, who are positioned at the intersections and act as conduits of connectivity.
- These 'connectors' may experience community memberships in highly complex ways, and are able to negotiate forms of frame alignment so that groups with very different positionalities are able to work with each other, for common goals.

A key example of this are politically radical activists who maintain their views while working with police officers who represent a state with which they feel disconnect, but with whom they are willing to work in order to save lives and prevent violence emanating from the state or grassroots.

- Where questions abound regarding the role of communities in supporting or preventing terror and political violence, the research suggests that individual 'connectors' may not only act as active participants, bridging physical, ideological and emotional gaps between communities and with the state, but may be able to facilitate change within communities more widely, through their positions of influence. Examples include mentoring work within preventive counter-terrorism, where 'connectors' able to negotiate the tensions between the state and grassroots focus on mentoring other key individuals in order to effect attitudinal change within communities.
- Communities really do appear relevant to countering terrorism and political violence but in far more complex ways than policy and security literature often suggests. This is not only due to the tensions created by the interactions and differing desires and needs of communities and state, but in part because communities are fluid and complex in themselves.

Recommendations for Future Research

Perhaps the most striking feature of this preliminary study has been the complexity of interactions between forms of community in the highly sensitive, and politically charged arena of counter-terrorism. The intersection of multiple forms of individual and group identities that define and sustain communities also operate at multiple locations – geographical, social, emotional and spiritual. At these intersections stand key individuals or 'connectors' whose positionalities reflect the complex dynamics and despite – or perhaps because of their precarious positions - are able to develop bridging relationships within and between communities.

From an analysis of the research data, and from the perspective of our key consultative participants, a number of questions are considered important for future research:

- How are individual connectors viewed within the communities they bridge?
- How are individuals 'chosen' by those with whom they interact? How do they claim and sustain legitimacy and influence?
- What tensions are felt and/or created by these individuals, and how may they alter the boundaries of communities? For example, to what extent are they viewed as bridges, or outsiders to both state and communities?

- How do power relations operate within and between communities in the context of counter-terrorism and security? How might this influence effectiveness of counter-terrorism practices from state and community perspectives?
- How might the complex realities of communities and their interactions be translated into policy, or between understood by security practitioners, the state, and communities themselves?

References and external links

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The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

"to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities."

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx

