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# “Groups Are Still a Problem . . . but a Different One!”: Reflecting on the Role Played by Non-Violent Extremist Groups in the Radicalisation Pathways of Individuals in the UK

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**Abstract:** Non-violent (vocal) extremists are at the centre of inflamed debates in the UK as they use their freedom of speech to legally oppose key democratic values and national authorities while targeting specific groups in the society as alleged enemies. This paper aims to explore the radicalisation pathways of individuals in the UK who hold radical and extreme ideas but who have not (yet) committed any offence. More precisely, this paper aims to uncover the role (if any) played by non-violent extremist groups in pathways to radicalisation. To do so, this paper focuses on people supported by the Channel programme, the main early de-radicalisation programme within the Prevent Scheme. This paper innovatively uses first-hand data reflecting the views of Channel practitioners on radicalisation pathways. This study concludes that non-violent extremist groups (as structures) still play a role in familiarising/aculturating individuals with specific ideological concepts. However, the processes of identity building and resource mobilisation seem to be strongly agent-led when observing Channel population in the UK.

**Keywords:** Channel programme; de-radicalisation; extremist groups; vocal extremism; agent–structure debate



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## 1. Introduction

Non-violent extremism is still a *terra incognita* across several disciplines encompassing criminology, security studies and sociology (Orofino and Allchorn 2023). While entailing minor nuances on the degree of susceptibility to violence, the terms “vocal, non-violent, and not-violent” extremism all include groups and individuals who hold strong anti-authority, anti-establishment and often anti-law enforcement ideas, complemented by the identification of a clear enemy (e.g., a minoritised group, political institutions, international corporations) and a group of alleged victims they advocate for (Orofino 2022). Comparative studies examining non-violent and violent expressions of extremism have elucidated similarities between the two categories, which mostly relate to their ideological foundations (Muhammad 2019; Littler and Lee 2023). It is not unusual to see non-violent Islamist groups (e.g., Hizb ut-Tahrir, recently banned in the UK) preaching concepts that resonate with Islamist terror groups, such as strong antisemitic stances (Orofino 2020b; Syal 2024). What really differentiates non-violent from violent extremist groups is their methodology for action, here also referred to as tactics.

Non-violent groups usually see violence as a counterproductive tactic long term. For this reason, they often focus on educating their members in a regular process of culturing,<sup>1</sup> which involves study groups, lectures, and familiarisation with key resources with the aim of convincing (rather than coercing) members and sympathisers on the importance of the group’s cause (Orofino 2021; Cloudy et al. 2023). Groups across different ideologies have acted for decades as alleged “educators of the masses”, recruiting individuals in the real world, acculturating them to their core values and initiating the individual’s development of a strong group identity impacting thoughts and behaviours (Al-Raffie 2013; Orofino

2020a; Yoder et al. 2023). This scenario (mostly group-centred) started changing post-2007, when the advent of hybrid pathways to radicalisation saw the online world playing a major role in shaping a new sense of “community” and “loyalty” (Oliver 1999; Kenyon et al. 2022; Kernot et al. 2022).

This research contributes to current debates on radicalisation processes (Meier et al. 2022) and investigates the radicalisation pathways of individuals in the UK who hold radical and extreme ideas but who have not (yet) committed any offence to explore the role (if any) played by non-violent extremist groups. To do so, this research takes into account insights from preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) practitioners working in the Channel programme, i.e., the main early de-radicalisation programme in the UK to prevent engagement in extremism and terrorism. This study is one of the few available to date reporting and analysing Channel practitioners’ views on the cases they actively work on; hence, it provides unique perspectives from the multiagency infrastructure that is at the forefront of preventing terrorism and radicalisation in the UK.

Responding to scholarly calls for more work on sub-TACT/sub-terrorism threshold (Thornton and Bouhana 2019; Schlegel 2022; Clubb et al. 2024), this study contributes to current debates on the Channel programme expanding on the ideological affiliation and the vulnerabilities of the people referred to Prevent and supported by Channel. While great scholarly attention is devoted to terrorist rehabilitation (Horgan and Braddock 2010) and terrorism risk factors (Schon and Nemeth 2022), very little space is granted to debates on prevention. Hence, this study aims to contribute to current knowledge on the topic, exploring the role of groups in radicalisation processes within Channel-adopted cases. “Group” vs. “self-led” radicalisation is still a terra incognita in security studies, with quite diverging viewpoints among relevant scholars (Alfano et al. 2018; Smith et al. 2020).

This research explores this duality using the structure–agent debate and social identity theory (SIT) to analyse the role of groups in the radicalisation processes of people supported by Channel. This study acknowledges the value added by numerous radicalisation theories in understanding the push and pull factors of radicalisation processes among different ideological milieux.<sup>2</sup> However, these factors are not the focus of this research, which, instead, specifically uses SIT as a theoretical concept to conceptualise the role of groups as structures and the role of individuals as agents, especially in the context of identity building, creation of meaning, and attachment to a specific organisation.

Prevent is an integral part of the UK counterterrorism strategy (CONTEST) aimed at shaping tailored early interventions aimed to fight against radicalisation, extremism, and terrorism.<sup>3</sup> The Channel programme—piloted in 2007 and rolled out in England and Wales in 2012—is the key space where all counterterrorism (CT) preventive actions are taken within a multiagency setting. Referrals to Channel can come from anyone and from any context, but they tend to be more prominently issued by the police and by the education sector (Home Office 2023).

Over the last 5 years, the number of Prevent referrals, as well as the number of people supported by the Channel programme, has swiftly increased across different age groups and sexes (Home Office 2023; Orofino 2023). More specifically, in the year ending 31 March 2023, over half of referrals (56%) to Prevent were for individuals aged 17 and under, who also accounted for the majority of referrals discussed at Channel panel (59%) and adopted as a Channel case (65%) (Home Office 2023). In terms of ideology, recent figures show that 37% were for individuals with “vulnerability present but no ideology or CT risk”, followed by extreme right-wing concerns (19%), conflicted ideology (18%), and referrals due to concerns regarding Islamist ideology (11%) (Home Office 2023). As stated above, the majority of cases involved different forms of vulnerability, which often included psychological vulnerabilities such as mental illness, traumatic experiences, perceived discrimination, and delinquency (Harpviken 2019). Neurodivergency also appears to be a vulnerability within Channel-adopted cases (Orofino 2023; Rousseau et al. 2023).

Not all Prevent referrals eventuate in Channel-adopted cases, only those considered a CT concern. Participation in Channel is voluntary, confidential, and is not a criminal

sanction (Orofino 2023). The type of support available is wide-ranging and can include help with education or career advice, dealing with mental or emotional health issues, and theological or ideological mentoring. The support programme often lasts 12 months; once finished, the CT risk is reassessed by the Channel panel together with the progress made by the individual over the year. Once the 12-month period terminates, cases are reviewed for another year, every six months.<sup>4</sup> The UK Prevent landscape further changed in March 2024, when the UK Government released a new definition of extremism, which describes extremism as “the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, that aims to: (1) negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; or (2) undermine, overturn or replace the UK’s system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or (3) intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in (1) or (2)” (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities 2024). At the same time of the release of this new definition, non-violent extreme groups across different ideologies were singled out by UK politicians as potentially conducive to violence (Grunewald and Devlin 2024). These groups included The British National Socialist Movement, Patriotic Alternative, CAGE, Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND), and the Muslim Association of Britain.

While the public labelling sparked inflamed counterarguments raised by the groups named (MEND 2024), this event shed greater light on the ongoing debate regarding the role of non-violent extreme groups as structures potentially driving individuals (as agents) to radicalisation pathways (Smith et al. 2020; Orofino and Allchorn 2023). This study encompasses several fields, including criminology, sociology and security studies. Using Channel practitioners’ lenses and experiences, this study shows how a variety of factors play a pivotal role in pathways to radicalisation of individuals supported by Channel. These factors are activated and reinforced by acculturation processes advanced by non-violent extremist organisations mostly operating online. To have a better understanding of this process, the section below frames the theoretical debates around groups behaving as structures and individuals (being members and/or supporters) as agents.

## 2. Groups as Structures, Individuals as Agents

Interactions between collective actors<sup>5</sup> and individuals have been at the centre of social movement studies and other branches of sociology for several decades. Scholars have often used the *structure–agent paradigm* to allow a deeper understanding and exploration of internal and external dynamics (Shapiro 2005; Orofino 2020b; Tulga 2022; Scott 2023). This paradigm is contextualised within social constructivism, which assumes that knowledge is constructed through social interaction within a certain organisation/group (Vygotsky 1978). Within this context, the term “structure” denotes the multifaceted and interconnected set of social forces, relations, institutions, and elements of social structure that work together to shape the thought, behaviour, experiences, choices, and overall life courses of people related to this structure (Tan 2011). Groups can be regarded as structures which impact individuals’ system of beliefs which eventually shape their views and behaviours.<sup>6</sup> Through a continuous process of culturing, the use of symbols, and practices, groups provide the individual with newly acquired knowledge over time (Giddens 1984). At the same time, individuals can exercise their agency, which is intended as the power of individuals “to think for themselves and act in ways that shape their experiences and life trajectories” (Cole 2017, p. 1).

While there is no scholarly consensus to date whether the construction of reality is primarily determined by structures (structural functionalism<sup>7</sup>), agents (methodological individualism<sup>8</sup>), or by both (mutual constitutionalism<sup>9</sup>), a theoretical agreement has been reached on three main outputs deriving from the structure–agent relation in the context of social groups, i.e., (1) cultural framing, (2) identity building, and (3) resource mobilisation (Benford and Snow 2000). Starting with *cultural framing*, groups as structures provide a system of frames specifically related to their ideology. More precisely, frames are defined as “schemata of interpretation that enable individuals ‘to locate, perceive, identify, and label’

occurrences within their life space and the world at large" (Goffman 1974, p. 21). Thus, collective action frames include sets of beliefs and values that motivate and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a group (Benford and Snow 2000). These frames are often causal to the second output considered in this study when looking at the structure–agent paradigm in reference to the relationship between groups and individuals, i.e., identity building.

*Identity building* is primarily related to the sociocognitive processes underlying group dynamics and how they shape identity among their members. Social identity derives from the person's knowledge that they belong to a certain group together with "some emotional value and significance to them of this group membership" (Tajfel 1972, p. 72). Groups behave as structures providing meanings and values to the individuals while boosting members' self-esteem so that members internalise specific stereotypes in such a way that they favour the in-group (Hinkle and Brown 1990). Groups promote a collective identity, also referred to as "social identity" in the context of collective actors and social movements (Guan and So 2016). This process is complete when individuals begin to consider themselves as an "extension of the collective whole" (Al-Raffie 2013, p. 78).

Once frames are conveyed and social identity has been built, groups become powerful structures to *mobilise resources*. Charles Tilly defines mobilisation as a "procedure through which a movement collects resources and then puts them under common control to be used in order to achieve a collective aim through a joint action" (Tilly 1978, p. 69). Resources can be of different kinds, but they all stand as vital elements to empower a group, to reinforce it against its competitors, and to boost its influence on the political, economic, and social scene (Orofino 2020b). Resources can be of different kinds and can include normative resources (the members' involvement and engagement within the group, its legitimacy and identity resources), coercive resources (the tools a group uses to let its plans prevail on his rivals' ones), and institutional resources, e.g., contacts with state agencies, elites, and mass media (Karagiannis and McCauley 2006).

This study uses the three theoretical elements mentioned above (cultural framing, identity building, and resource mobilisation) to explore the impact of vocal extremist groups on the radicalisation pathways of individuals in the UK who hold radical and extreme ideas but who have not offended (yet) through the lenses and via the experience of Channel practitioners surveyed.

### 3. Research Method

This study aimed to answer the following main research question: *Do non-violent extremist groups play any role in the radicalisation pathways of Channel population in the UK?* To investigate this question, this study focuses on Channel-adopted cases and the insights from P/CVE practitioners delivering the Channel programme and working with radicalised individuals representing a counterterrorism concern. The Channel population is mostly represented by people who have not (yet) offended and therefore stand in the precriminal space. In order to answer the main research question of this study, three sub-questions (SQs) were identified:

S.Q.1: What are the most prominent ideologies among Channel-adopted cases?

S.Q.2: Are individuals supported by the Channel programme affiliated with any specific non-violent extremist group?

S.Q.3: What are the elements that work as vulnerabilities to radicalisation within Channel-adopted cases?

While the first and second sub-questions aim at providing evidence to discuss the theoretical elements identified above (i.e., the role played by groups as structures in cultural framing, identity building, and resource mobilisation), the third sub-question provides more information on the factors and vulnerabilities that can trigger individual pathways towards radicalisation.

### 3.1. Data Collection

Access to Channel panels was granted to the author as “an observer” in the period antecedent to the Home Office guidance (communicated to the author in November 2021) restricting Channel panel meetings to external observers, if not specifically authorised by central government. The author was introduced to different Channel panels facilitators and chairs by a Prevent Regional Coordinator. Introductions followed written requests to take part as an observer in Channel panels monthly meetings, which were mostly granted. Before commencing data collection, the author submitted an ethics application, and ethical approval was given by the University for a period of three years. Data collection was performed remotely through observations, one stakeholder survey, and two in-depth interviews with two Prevent/Channel practitioners. More details of all three activities are provided below.

1. **Observations:** The author attended panel monthly meetings of two Channel panels from April until July 2021. At the beginning of each meeting, the chair would announce the presence of researcher as an observer so that all participants were made aware. The researcher was not allowed to record the meetings, but it was possible to take notes which were essential to build the dataset of 20 anonymised cases. This dataset allowed the researcher to understand more about the ideological profile of the people referred to Prevent and supported by Channel as well as their background, group affiliation, and vulnerabilities.

2. **Stakeholder survey:** The survey included 25 questions developed by the author in line with the main research question and the three sub-questions that this study aims to answer. The questions were mixed (open-ended and close-ended) to grasp the respondents’ insights into the (possible) role of vocal extremist groups in the radicalisation pathways of people supported by the Channel programme. The survey was disseminated through Channel panel facilitators to the members of their panel. The survey was disseminated to approximately 25 people and had 13 responses from frontline practitioners. All participants surveyed worked within Prevent, covering different roles within the Channel panels. More precisely, 7 out of 13 participants worked in a local authority (mostly as Prevent Leads, Channel Panel Chairs, Prevent Managers, Prevent Officers), with the remaining 6 participants being dispersed across emergency services, counterterrorism policing, and social work.

Some of the questions included in the survey were: “Do you think vocal extremist groups can lead people to terrorism?” and “Do individuals referred to Channel usually have a clear ideological profile (for example, Islamist, Far-right, Far-left, etc)?”

3. **Interviews:** This study also included two semistructured interviews with two frontline practitioners that were part of the same Channel panel. One practitioner was a social worker while the other one was a police officer. Both interviews were conducted online through MS Teams. The automatic transcription function was used to retrieve both transcripts, which were later checked and refined by the author. As per the stakeholder survey, the interview guide used for these interviews reflected the purpose of this study and mirrored the research questions. Some of the questions asked included: “Are Channel cases you work with usually affiliated/do they identify themselves with any specific extremist but non-violent group?” and “Do you think that non-violent extremist groups can lead people to terrorism? Why? Why not?”

As mentioned above, data collection performed within this research mostly entailed small samples. Working with a small sample (fewer than 20 participants) proved to be fruitful for the purposes of this study and confirmed the positive aspects highlighted by the scholarship supporting this technique (Crouch and McKenzie 2006). More precisely, the small sample allowed the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews and to explore the respondents’ perceptions regarding specific themes or situations, as well as their knowledge and practice, serving the main purpose of generating data, i.e., to give an authentic insight into people’s experiences (Silverman 1993).

Indeed, the two interviews conducted with Channel practitioners allowed a deeper exploration of their understanding of non-violent extremism, on the role played by vocal extremist groups in driving people to radicalisation, of any group affiliation among Channel cases, on the demographics of the Channel panel population, and their vulnerabilities, therefore serving the purpose of this study. The interviews also complemented and validated the results emerging from the stakeholder survey and from the case dataset built by the researcher, working as a tool for data triangulation.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

Numerical data extracted from the dataset of Channel-adopted cases (retrieved through observations) as well as close-ended questions from the survey were analysed and visually displayed through pie charts, histograms, and bar charts. Due to working with a small sample of data, this study uses bar charts as they provide an insightful way of conveying the little information in a way that is informative and dependable (Weissgerber et al. 2015). Qualitative data retrieved from the survey and the interviews were submitted to a rigorous thematic analysis following the widely used procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). These procedures are based on six main stages: (1) Data familiarisation (cleaning and reading the data for content familiarity); (2) Generating initial codes (systematically coding the data and collating data relevant to each code); (3) Searching for themes (grouping codes into potential themes); (4) Reviewing themes (confirming that themes make sense in relation to codes); (5) Defining and naming themes (refining the specifics of each theme, clarifying the contents and giving each theme a clear name); (6) Producing the report (detailed presentation of the evidence underpinning each theme). The six stages outlined above ensure that the data collected are checked for quality, thematic relevance, and whether they responded to the main research questions of the study. This process provided core thematic material related to participants' experiences as frontline practitioners in the Channel programme.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Stakeholders' Perspectives: Survey and Interviews

Stakeholders' perspectives were captured through the two interviews and the survey. Both tools for data collection revealed similar results. The survey was disseminated among practitioners working within Channel panels around the UK and shed light on the position, experience, and opinions of 13 participants. When asked about their job, practitioners mentioned that their main aim was "to understand and divert people from terrorism and associated groups" (Survey Respondent 12) and their main responsibilities as "conduits" to Council services, which also included the gathering of information (Survey Respondent 9). When asked what their understanding of non-violent extremism was, the majority of respondents (11/13) expressed a "good" or "strong" level of knowledge, with only two people admitting a "limited" level. Some stakeholders provided definitions of their understanding of non-violent extremism, which included:

"The vocal opposition of our country's fundamental values". (Survey respondent 1)

"People/groups who espouse extreme/hateful rhetoric but do not overtly call for the use of violent or harmful tactics or achieve their goals". (Survey respondent 10)

"Protests, posting material in public places, expressing extreme views publicly, using social media to express extreme views". (Survey respondent 8)

The three definitions quoted above grasped three core elements characterising non-violent extremism, e.g., vocal opposition against fundamental democratic values (including anti-authority feelings), endorsement of extreme positions without the open support/encouragement to use violent tactics, and dissemination of extreme ideas in open social spaces both online and offline. All participants agreed that non-violent extremism can be conducive to radicalisation and even to violence.

The views from the survey were complemented by the practitioners interviewed. When asked about vocal extremism, one interviewee defined it as “individuals or groups holding views outside the norms of the society but not using violence” (Practitioner 1, personal communication, 27 May 2021), while the other interviewee stated that she “never heard this term before” (Practitioner 2, personal communication, 14 May 2021). Participants also agreed on the fact that individuals do need to have violent intentions in principle to be persuaded into extreme violent action. The latter can be triggered by “an interest in extremist groups” (or in some narratives propagated by such groups), which can develop into active support or membership (Survey respondents 1, 3, 4, 6, 10). Interviewees expanded on this topic, both arguing that vocal extremist groups could potentially lead people to terrorism:

“Vocal extremist groups can lead people to terrorism. Especially young people, as they take advantages of their naivety and vulnerabilities (. . .) I would say that groups are still a problem but a different one today as media-assisted radicalisation has taken over”. (Practitioner 2, personal communication, 14 May 2021)

“Vocal extremist groups can lead people to terrorism because they try to instil a sense of fear and urgency. For instance, Patriotic Alternative has a countdown on their website. This sense of fear can work as a catalyst to violence for certain people who have specific grievances, e.g., white people should come first, not non-natives. They feel deprived. They are not getting what they should because others are getting it”. (Practitioner 1, personal communication, 27 May 2021)

As elucidated by the quotes above, Channel practitioners involved in this research strongly believed that non-violent extremist groups can lead people to radicalisation and eventually to violence because of the ideological tenets they propagate and the fear and sense of deprivation they allegedly champion against, which calls people to urgent action. Practitioner 1 highlighted how the role of the groups has changed vis à vis the rise of media assisted self-radicalisation trends. However, institutionalised groups with a clear ideological profile still play a pivotal role in extreme content creation and distribution, both online and offline. When asked if the government should ban vocal extremist groups, practitioners felt that these groups should be banned although this could have side effects as “the ban would feed their victimisation rhetoric and it might trigger social anger” (Practitioner 1, personal communication, 27 May 2021). Furthermore, one interviewee added that if vocal extremist groups were banned “it is likely that activities would still continue to operate but they would go underground. . .at least now the government can monitor them.” (Practitioner 2, personal communication, 14 May 2021).

#### 4.2. Channel Adopted Cases

Observing two Channel panels for 3 months allowed the researcher to build a dataset of 20 cases. As Channel panels meet every month, the amount of the cases discussed varies and it comprises the following categories:

1. **Review cases:** People who have completed the early de-radicalisation support programme and are followed up by the panel 6 months and 12 months after the end of the programme. If the panel decides that after the 12-month review the person is not a CT concern anymore, he/she is discharged by the panel.
2. **Live cases:** People who are currently supported by the Channel programme through various initiatives, tailored to their specific needs and vulnerabilities.
3. **Newly adopted cases:** People whose case has been adopted at the Channel panel meeting.

The dataset built through the observation of the researcher includes 4 review cases, 10 live cases, and 6 newly adopted cases.

Figure 1 shows the dataset comprising the 20 cases analysed for this study. This dataset was built using the NVIVO case classification function which allowed a deeper exploration of each of the features characterising the cases discussed at Channel panels meetings. For the purpose of this study, the following attributes were identified as relevant because they

were pertinent to the research questions of this study and comparable among all cases, i.e., gender, ideology, mental health issues, neurodivergence, age, on medications, online radicalisation, and self-harm. Values were assigned where information was available. Where relevant details were not available or disclosed, the specific field shows as “unassigned”.

Channel Adopted Cases - Dataset							
Cases	Gender	Ideology	Mental Health Conditions/Disorders	Age	On medications	Online radicalisation	Self Harm
1	Male	Islamist	Yes - not specified	Under 18	Unassigned	Yes	Unassigned
2	Male	Far-right	Yes - not specified	Over 18	Unassigned	Unassigned	Unassigned
3	Male	Far-right	Yes - not specified	Over 18	Unassigned	Unassigned	Unassigned
4	Male	Unassigned	ASD	Under 18	Unassigned	Yes	Yes
5	Male	Mixed	Yes - not specified	Under 18	No	Yes	Yes
6	Male	Far-right	ASD	Over 18	Yes	Yes	No
7	Male	Mixed	ASD	Under 18	Yes	Yes	No
8	Male	Mixed	Unassigned	Under 18	Unassigned	Yes	Unassigned
9	Male	Far-right	Yes - not specified	Over 18	Yes	Unassigned	Unassigned
10	Male	Mixed	ASD	Under 18	Yes	Unassigned	Unassigned
11	Male	Far-right	Depression	Over 18	Yes	Yes	No
12	Male	Islamist	Depression	Over 18	Yes	Unassigned	Unassigned
13	Female	Islamist	Depression	Unassigned	Yes	Unassigned	Yes
14	Male	Mixed	PTSD	Under 18	Yes	Yes	Yes
15	Male	Far-right	Yes - not specified	Under 18	Unassigned	Yes	Not Applicable
16	Male	Mixed	Yes - not specified	Over 18	Unassigned	Unassigned	Unassigned
17	Male	Far-right	Unassigned	Over 18	Unassigned	Unassigned	Unassigned
18	Male	Mixed	PTSD	Under 18	Unassigned	Yes	Yes
19	Female	Islamist	Unassigned	Under 18	Unassigned	Unassigned	Unassigned
20	Male	Far-right	Unassigned	Under 18	Unassigned	Unassigned	Unassigned

Figure 1. Channel-adopted cases dataset.

Findings deriving from the analysis of the attributes identified above provide relevant insights into the demographics, ideological profile, and vulnerabilities characterising Channel-adopted cases. Looking at the demographics, results of this research show that the population of Channel-adopted cases is characterised by young individuals, including minors aged under 18. This aspect was captured by the dataset and confirmed by both the stakeholder survey and the interviews. More precisely, the dataset showed that 58% of cases were represented by adolescent individuals, showing a significant prominence of this age group. This prominence seems to be related to fact that the large number of Prevent referrals come from the schools and the education sector (Home Office 2023). In terms of gender, the dataset showed a great prominence of men over women, with 18 male cases and only 2 females. They were all British nationals. With regard to the ideology, there seems to be important differences between the under 18 and over 18 population.

As visualised in Figure 2, the ideological profile of Channel-adopted cases shows how far-right ideology results as more attractive to individuals aged over 18, whereas under-18s seem more into mixed, unstable, uncertain ideologies (MUUIs). At the same time, Islamism seemed to be less characteristic of the Channel population in 2021 when data collection for this study was conducted. Only three cases presented a clear Islamist ideology: two people who were under 18, and one person who was aged 18 and over.

The dataset confirmed the responses from the stakeholder survey highlighting the prominence of MUUIs on clear and identifiable ideological trends among Channel-adopted cases, especially aged under 18.

Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the practitioners’ responses to the questionnaire. Respondents confirmed that Channel-adopted cases present a majority of MUUIs, followed by an interest in the far-right. Practitioners also mentioned some extreme groups that were inciting individuals in their pathways to radicalisation both online and offline, such as Patriotic Alternative (PA), Hizb ut-Tahrir and the English Defence League (EDL).



“We had a couple of cases of people (informally) affiliated with EDL. They were not official members, but they liked their ideology and often visited the group website”. (Survey respondent 9)

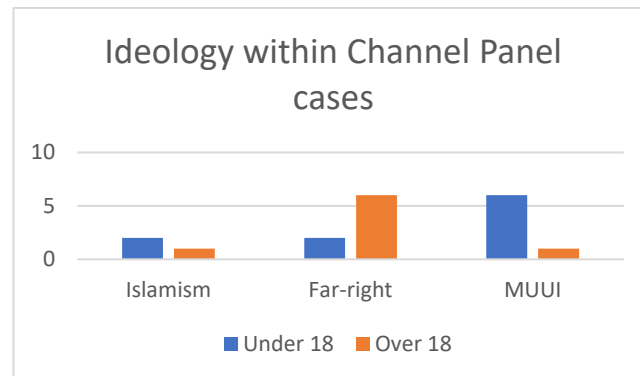


Figure 2. Ideological profile from cases—dataset.

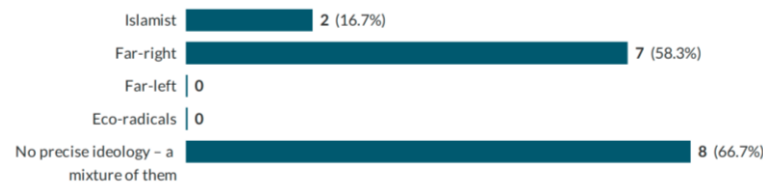


Figure 3. Ideological affiliation—Channel cases, stakeholders survey.

As mentioned by Survey respondent 9, Channel-adopted cases tend to be inspired by the ideology of specific groups, but they are rarely official members. In fact, 90% of practitioners surveyed stated that the cases they work with do not often present any formal affiliation to any extreme group. In addition to some supporters of PA and EDL, practitioners involved in this study also mentioned Generation Identity (GI) and Hundred Handers as white separatist and white supremacists groups inspiring the ideological profile of the cases they work with (Practitioner 2, personal communication, 14 May 2021). A niche group mentioned by the interviewees was the “Slightly Fruity Monarch”, apparently propagating mixed ideologies (with prominent elements of both fascism and communism) among young people and mostly on gaming sites (Practitioner 2, personal communication, 27 May 2021).

#### 4.3. Vulnerabilities

Mental health issues, neurodivergence,<sup>10</sup> and child abuse emerged as important vulnerabilities characterising Channel-adopted cases explored in this research. This study rejects any implicit connection between vulnerabilities and engagement in extreme and terror activities. However, this study revealed how, according to Channel practitioners surveyed, specific vulnerabilities can facilitate the exploitation of some individuals given their specific cognitive traits (or emotional needs) and create a sense of outrage to move further into direct action:

“If a person is vulnerable enough to be influenced into any form of vocal/non-violent support of an ideal, then they are equally vulnerable to being exploited in other ways to directly or indirectly support groups who do use more violent means of furthering their cause”. (Survey respondent 4)

“If an ideology is extreme in nature, then an individual who is neurodivergent could misinterpret the message to go on and do something in the name of that ideology”. (Survey respondent 13)

“It has been evidenced that working with vulnerable people with mental health conditions and exploiting particular issues can create the required sense of outrage and or commitment to move further into direct action. The narrative provides for several people the rationale to move from verbal to direct action”. (Survey respondent 10)

Practitioners’ responses above stress how mental health issues and neurodivergence should not be considered as conduits to extremism or terrorism. Instead, these stand as vulnerabilities that can provide fertile ground for exploitation and grooming by groups or single radicalising actors. According to the respondents, these vulnerabilities imply misinterpretations and an enhanced sense of deprivation and victimisation that can trigger vocal and/or violent extreme behaviours.

Practitioners agreed that the vast majority of cases they work with are represented by individuals with underlying mental health conditions and neurodivergence, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, with a majority of autism. While existing research does not indicate that autism is a causal factor for extremism engagement in the general population, practitioners surveyed in this study highlighted how the majority of their cases within the extremist population in the precriminal space have autism. The latter stands as a type of neurodivergence presenting two core diagnostic criteria: social communication and interaction difficulties; and restricted, repetitive behavioural patterns (Salman and Al-Attar 2023).

Practitioners surveyed in this study were aware that autism is a spectrum condition, which implies that it can impact people in different ways. For this reason, practitioners often referred to “autism spectrum disorder” or ASD. However, as several cases discussed were not (yet) officially diagnosed, this paper refers to the “broad autism phenotype” (BAP) to indicate such instances. BAP refers to “traits of autism, which may not meet the threshold of a clinical diagnosis” (Salman and Al-Attar 2023, p. 5). When looking at the database (Figure 1), it stands out that autism (ASD) was officially diagnosed in eight cases, presenting comorbidities with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In line with current studies on autism and extremism (Rousseau et al. 2023), it has been highlighted by P/CVE practitioners how these conditions and disorders can exacerbate the challenges experienced by individuals with autism. For instance, autism-related interests could become more nihilistic or destructive.

In Figure 1, some mental health conditions/disorders are labelled as “not specified” as they refer to cases that Channel panel members felt characterised by mental health issues or BAP but did not feel comfortable to name the condition/disorder primarily because it was undiagnosed. Practitioners also highlighted that mental health conditions and neurodivergence are often accompanied by very chaotic family backgrounds, characterised by various forms of abuse and adverse child experiences (ACEs),<sup>11</sup> criminality, and poor mental and physical health of family members. Among the cases involved in this study, three reported depression and two post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Traumatic experiences appeared to be particularly related to the family background of Channel-adopted cases. One of them included a young man (just over 18) who experienced sexual abuse in the family and bullying at school for several years. Channel panel members discussed the justification provided by the young person as he saw the need to defend himself and create a strong personality. As a result, he became very aggressive and had previously assaulted many individuals, including a social worker.

Another case discussed was characterised by a very chaotic family background and included a young man (under 18) who had already been referred to a psychiatrist as possibly affected by schizophrenia.<sup>12</sup> The panel was informed that the young man was constantly hearing voices telling him what to do. He was part of a family where the father took his life and the mother (who was not well herself) had to take care of the young person referred to Prevent and three more siblings, all with special educational and developmental needs.

This research also showed that 8 out of 16 cases with mental health issues/disorders were on medications already when their case was discussed at the local Channel panel. A total of 15 out of 16 cases were men (reflecting the gender of the majority of the population

of Channel-adopted cases) and 7 out of 16 cases were under 18. As showed in the dataset (Figure 1), 4 cases under 18 reported self-harm and suicidal thoughts, suggesting the suffering and struggle characterising the lives of these young people often years before they are referred to Prevent and then supported by Channel.

## 5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the impact (if any) of non-violent extremist groups on the radicalisation pathways of Channel population in the UK through practitioners' insights. In doing so, this research does not focus on any specific groups as a case study but, rather, focuses on individuals (the agents) and uses a mixed approach to let the data highlight specific new concepts while testing the following theoretical concepts: cultural framing, identity building, and resource mobilisation.

The results of this research showed that Channel cases do not seem particularly attached to any formally established non-violent extreme group. The cases observed in this study started their journey towards radicalisation by accessing propaganda material disseminated by legal non-violent extreme groups, but they rarely were (or became) formal members of any specific group. However, practitioners surveyed highlighted that groups are still performing the role of structures when conveying specific schemata of interpretation and meanings (culturing process), but these are conveyed way beyond their official members, going to the wider public online. The lack of formal membership to specific groups among the Channel population makes the acculturation process quite weak as individuals are not regularly familiarised with core ideological concepts and the related learning activities, such as study groups, lectures, talks, and mentoring from senior members. This leaves great room to personal interpretation and tweaking of ideological concepts, which often leads to rise of the "salad bar extremism" (Gartenstein-Ross et al. 2023, p. 1), suggesting the rapid increase in self-radicalisation pathways characterised by mixed ideologies.

Channel panel adopted cases are moving away from fixed ideological tenets sponsored by highly institutionalised groups, now transitioning towards hybrid extreme positions where extremist ideologies that were once considered antithetical have now become a reality, e.g., white supremacist ideas coexisting with jihadist stances. Channel-adopted cases were able to "mix and match" different stances belonging to various ideologies which respond to their grievances at a specific moment in time, and this new trend is what seems to have produced a rise in mixed, unstable, uncertain, ideologies (MUUIs) over the last 7 to 10 years. However, this analysis suggests that vocal extremist groups are still contributing to cultural framing of individuals supported by Channel as they have disclosed support for specific organisations whose ideas have inspired them.

With regard to identity building, non-violent extremist groups seem to play a minor role among the Channel population. The database of Channel-adopted cases as well as the insights from practitioners suggests that extreme ideologies stand for these individuals as a medium to express their anger and frustration as well as to feel part of a group of people (not necessarily a well-established group) having a noble purpose and working for the greater good. Individuals seemed to embark in a bottom-up process of identity building (agent-led) around concepts and values that enhanced their self-esteem and efficacy in a specific moment of their life. Channel cases explored build their identity while interacting with various radicalising actors (e.g., networks, individuals, etc.) and radicalising factors (e.g., grievances, life transitions, etc.), but this process is not usually led or dependent upon any non-violent extreme group.

Lastly, with regard to resource mobilisation, formally established non-violent extremist groups seem to play a minor role when it comes to the Channel population, too. Pre-2007, when face-to-face radicalisation and culturing was still prominent (Kenyon et al. 2022), resource mobilisation was the final outcome of the processes of cultural framing and identity building for highly institutionalised non-violent extremist groups (Orofino 2020b). After individuals had espoused the group vision of the world and had identified as "extension

of the collective whole" (Al-Raffie 2013, p. 78), they were usually ready to be mobilised and to mobilise all resources under their control, e.g., intellectual, monetary, time. The lack of formal membership to any highly institutionalised group among Channel-adopted cases seems also to determine the minor role played by these groups in mobilising resources and individuals.

The enhanced role of individuals' agency over the groups' structural role appears to be quite complex, also considering the wide number of vulnerabilities that people supported by the Channel programme have. This study showed that mental health conditions (diagnosed and non-diagnosed) are prevalent among Channel-adopted cases and they include PTSD, depression, and, in some cases, schizophrenia. Channel cases are also characterised by different forms of neurodivergence, including ASD and ADHD. Individuals supported by Channel often come from families where substance and alcohol abuse are typical together with criminal behaviours and a wide range of adverse child experiences (ACEs), which include physical abuse, sexual abuse, and parental neglect.

The results of this study suggest that Channel-adopted cases are mostly made up of young people who live in very difficult conditions, whose identity building and mobilisation seem to be fostered by personal grievances and traumatic lived experiences that mix with extreme content encountered online that provide a sense of belonging and meaning to life.

## 6. Limitations

This paper presents the following limitations. Firstly, in presenting the data, the author acknowledges that the conflation between "specified vs. unspecified" mental health conditions and disorders (including neurodivergence) can be simplistic, as it leaves out a wide spectrum of nuances that characterise specific conditions mentioned in the study. Furthermore, the data come from non-medical specialists whose knowledge on mental health issues and neurodivergence is often quite limited. Even the practitioners' perception of "unspecified mental health problems" can be quite limiting, as Channel-adopted cases were attributed these characteristics despite the practitioners acknowledging they are not qualified to make a diagnosis. While recognising these limitations, this study still fulfils its original purpose, i.e., looking at Channel-adopted cases as a population representing vocal extremists in the UK and understanding if non-violent extreme groups have played a role in their pathways to radicalisation. To do so, this paper explores the perspectives of the people working with these individuals (Channel practitioners) and therefore reports the reality seen and captured through their eyes, using their jargon, their understanding of the phenomenon, and their insights. This study does not claim to provide accurate medical definitions of specific conditions; instead, it stands as a qualitative contribution designed using constructivism as a theoretical paradigm which aims to explore how reality is built by and upon the individuals, analysing their experience, perceptions, and understandings.

## 7. Conclusions

This study explored the role of non-violent extremist groups on the radicalisation pathways of the Channel population in the UK through Channel practitioners' insights. Building on the agent–structure paradigm and therefore investigating how vocal extremist groups (as structures) influence the beliefs and behaviours of individuals supported by the Channel programme (agents), this study was designed as "agent-focused" research, aimed at exploring the impact of structures on the agents through Channel practitioners' insights and observation and Channel panels. This study followed a deductive and inductive mixed approach to let the data highlight specific new concepts while testing the following theoretical concepts: cultural framing, identity building, and resource mobilisation. The results of this study showed that radicalisation does not happen in a vacuum and that (institutionalised) vocal extremist groups of different ideological milieux (e.g., Islamists, far-right collective actors) still play an important role in cultural framing. More precisely, these groups disseminate extreme content both online and offline, legally operating under part of the fundamental right to free speech and association they enjoy in liberal contexts.

Whereas the role of vocal extremist groups is still significant in the cultural framing of Channel-adopted cases, it seems less prominent when it comes to identity building. This study showed that this process is mostly agent-led within Channel-adopted cases where individuals seemed to embrace concepts and values that enhanced their self-esteem and efficacy in a specific moment of their life. The latter was often characterised by the interaction with various radicalising actors (e.g., networks, individuals, etc.) and radicalising factors (e.g., grievances, life transitions, etc.), but this process is not usually led or dependent upon any non-violent extreme group.

The same conclusions emerged when reflecting upon resource mobilisation. As the Channel-adopted cases explored lack formal membership to any highly institutionalised groups, the group as a structure did not play any significant role in mobilising them. Instead, it is, rather, leaderless networks and extreme sub-cultures across different milieus that seem to mobilise individuals to action, both in offline and online eco-systems. This study highlighted how most of the Channel-adopted cases are represented by individuals who have radicalised online on legal platforms (e.g., social media, blogs, streaming and gaming platforms), mixing and matching ideological concepts from various sources and therefore giving birth to what is labelled as mixed, uncertain, unstable ideologies (MUUIs).

The Channel population appeared to be characterised by young individuals (under 18) coming from chaotic family backgrounds and struggling with a variety of (un-)diagnosed mental health issues and developmental disorders that are vulnerable to extreme ideologies of various kinds which all provide an alleged noble purpose and meaning to life. More research is needed on the presence of extremist contents on easily accessible mainstream social media platforms as well as on streaming platforms where, very frequently, individuals (both adults and underaged) are exposed to non-violent extremist (or so-called “lawful but awful”) content.

Future studies should also expand on the role of less institutionalised groups who are increasing the role of structures in culturing, identity building, and mobilisation of their supporters. For instance, it would be useful to see more research on leaderless organisations (such as the Radical Environmental Activism, REA) and their role as structures mobilising individuals around the world. Finally, future research should also look at ways we can empower young users to be safe online, which could include education campaigns and bystander interventions.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Dataset shared in the paper together with results of the survey. Full interview transcripts are not available for privacy reasons.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> By culturing, it is here intended the “process initiated by an organisation to instruct its affiliates on specific values and meanings” (see [Orofino 2018](#)).
- <sup>2</sup> Examples of prominent radicalisation theories include as [Moghaddam’s \(2005\)](#) “staircase” to terrorism, [McCauley and Moskalenko’s \(2008\)](#) “pyramid” to terrorism, and [Baran’s \(2005\)](#) “conveyor belt” to terrorism, which mostly focus on the shift from radicalisation

to terrorism, hence excluded as theoretical frameworks for this study as beyond the scope of this research. Other relevant theories explaining the processes of radicalisation include “Strain Theory” (Skoczylis and Andrews 2022), the “Significance Quest Theory” (Da Silva et al. 2023), and “Identity Fusion” (Bonin and Lane 2022) all endeavouring to explain what pushes individuals towards radical beliefs and mobilise them to action.

- 3 In addition to Prevent, CONTEST is made up of three more strands (all together known as the 4 Ps), i.e., Pursue (aimed at stopping terrorist attacks from happening in the UK and overseas), Protect (aimed at strengthening protection against a terrorist attack in the UK or overseas), and Prepare (aimed at mitigating the impact of a terrorist incident if it occurs). The latest version of CONTEST (2023) has confirmed the 4 Ps framework and has highlighted the rise of minors investigated and arrested by Counter Terrorism Police mostly for non-violent terror-related offences (e.g., the collection or dissemination of terrorist publications) occurred online. See: Home Office (2023). Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CONTEST), p. 15. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1186413/CONTEST\\_2023\\_English\\_updated.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1186413/CONTEST_2023_English_updated.pdf) (accessed on 11 December 2023).
- 4 Channel practitioners distinguish between “live cases” and “review cases”. While the former refers to individuals who are currently receiving support from Channel, the latter refers to those individuals who have completed the 12 months support programme and are now subject to two six-months reviews (author observation at Channel Panels, April–July 2021).
- 5 The term “collective actors” includes social movements, organisations, associations, networks, or groups. While aware of minor terminological nuances, this study uses the words “groups” and “organisations” as synonyms.
- 6 This paper uses theoretical approaches deriving from social movement theory and uses the terms “groups” and “movements” as synonyms.
- 7 Structural functionalists argue that structures play a pivotal role in shaping social reality as perceived by agents, who then perform their agency as a mere result of what the structure has determined (Durkheim 2014; Van de Walle 2008).
- 8 Scholars belonging to this trend see the agent as the major player in the process of the construction of social reality (Heath 2015; Hodgson 2007).
- 9 These scholars argue that the structure and the agents are mutually constitutive entities whose continuous interaction shapes their main characteristics (Parsons 1949; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Cohen 1989).
- 10 Neurodivergence is here understood as “an umbrella term for a variety of neurodevelopmental disorders including autism, ADHD, learning difficulties and disabilities, developmental language disorders, tic disorders, and some acquired brain injuries” (Salman and Al-Attar 2023; Exceptional Individuals 2023).
- 11 Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) include physical, sexual, and mental abuse together with parental abandonment, domestic violence, and prejudice. These traumas, experienced both in early infancy and later life, are among the complex demands that have been investigated and linked to radicalised people (Guinn et al. 2022). Recent studies have demonstrated that ACEs can significantly impact an adult’s likelihood to be drawn to violence later in life (RAN Practitioners 2019; Violence Prevention Unit 2022).
- 12 This case shows as “Yes—not specified” in the dataset (Figure 1) as the diagnosis was not official at the time of the observation.

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