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**Negotiating difference in education: Extremism, political agency and an ethics of care**

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**Abstract**

At the heart of debates over how education should engage with extremism is how to negotiate difference in the context of value pluralism. Existing approaches are largely rooted in a rights and justice-based model. Here, I argue there is a need to supplement this with a greater commitment to an ethics of care rooted in a relational approach to education and social interaction. I explore these ideas using research carried out with community groups engaged with those ‘at risk’ of involvement in extremism, concluding that in the effort to foster critical, compassionate citizens it is necessary to provide safe spaces to negotiate difference and develop caring relations. Such spaces should widen the object of critical thinking, resist the security and risk-oriented framework in which this work is increasingly embedded and support young people’s political agency in ways that allow them, and society, to flourish.

## Introduction

Significant challenges face the effort to prevent extremism. Fundamentally, involvement in political violence is extremely rare; fewer than 600 people have been convicted of terrorism related offences in the UK between 2001 and December 2015 (Home Office, 2016). Extrapolating from such limited data to understand who might be ‘at risk’ of involvement in terrorism is extremely difficult. Attempts to identify a ‘terrorist profile’ or ‘radicalisation pathway’ have largely fallen foul of the heterogeneous nature of militant journeys (Horgan, 2014). Despite the complexity involved in understanding engagement in extremism, policy makers, practitioners, and academics have tried to identify signs that someone may be ‘at risk’ of involvement in extremism. In the UK, this falls under the remit of the Prevent stream of CONTEST, the government’s counter terrorism policy (Home Office, 2011). Included in the agencies legally obliged to identify and refer those ‘vulnerable to radicalisation’ are education providers. Beyond this form of direct intervention, increasing attention is being paid to how education might support the effort to prevent extremism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, education’s role in addressing extremism is controversial. One of the more important issues is how to engage with contentious political questions in the context of value pluralism. This chapter explores two key features of this debate: the content of ideas explored in schools, and the parameters by which those ideas might be judged. Policy in the UK is increasingly focusing on the content of education and the need to instill ‘fundamental British values’ (Morgan, 2015). Scholarly approaches instead tend to emphasise the importance of justice and human rights as the most appropriate parameters bounding how value judgements should be made (Davies, 2009; Aly, Taylor and Karnovsky, 2014; Gereluk, 2013). Such perspectives have important benefits; however, they face challenges. In exploring the limits of these approaches, I argue there is a need to supplement, and in some cases replace some of their core features with a greater commitment to an ethics of care rooted in a relational approach to education and social interaction.

What follows makes the case that education should provide a structure within which young people can develop a sense of political agency reflected in a critical, and crucially, a compassionate approach to those questions that terrorism and political violence are, at root, concerned with: how to ‘do’ politics in an increasingly pluralistic society; what to do about difference and injustice; how to ensure that different constituencies and identity groups’ voices are heard; what counts as ‘extreme’ or ‘moderate’, and why. And moreover, that such questions should be negotiated in a setting which is ‘safe’, one guided by a commitment to the intrinsic value of education in support of human flourishing and which resists the instrumentalisation implicated in the increasing securitisation of the sector. Such spaces are enriched by a commitment to an ethics of care that is relation centered rather than agent centered (Noddings, 2002). That is, a setting which encourages young people to become embedded in social relations that recognise moral interdependence and reciprocity, and where appropriate behaviour is defined situationally and relationally, rather than by recourse to an abstract set of values.

This argument is underpinned by research carried out with third sector organisations that work with those considered ‘at risk’ of involvement in extremism (Marsden, 2016). Such community-based groups reflect an alternative model to mainstream education, one willing to engage critically with a broader palette of issues. Although not without flaws, they often

represent a more inclusive space where young people can develop their identity as political agents through expanding the scope of their critical thinking. Whilst reflecting aspects of rights and justice-based arguments about the legitimacy of violence, these community organisations also encompass an ethics of care. Beginning with a commitment to the individual that resists the security framework within which much of this work is embedded, they try to foster pro-social practices through caring relations to develop political agency. The chapter explores the implications of these arguments to consider how mainstream education can protect individuals and society from harm and contribute to a shared sense of responsibility and engaged citizenship.

### **Educating against extremism**

While it is widely accepted that education has a role in challenging ‘radicalisation and extremism’ (Clark and Woodhead, 2014), debate remains over the basis on which this should be taken forward. In the political realm, increasing focus has been placed on the content of the curriculum, for example, former Education Secretary Nicky Morgan argued: “[e]very school should be promoting fundamental British values, not just because they act as a bulwark against extremism, but because it is the right thing to do.” (2015, para. 29). However, the nature of ‘fundamental British values’ is difficult to define. Famously, Theresa May, then Home Secretary was unable to offer a coherent defence of what such values were, beyond relatively vague notions of the rule of law, human rights, and the democratic process (Today, 2015). Such ambiguity is in part because values are dynamic, changing in response to shifts in social norms, something which points to the importance of education’s role in exploring and critiquing such concepts rather than being seen primarily as a mechanism to deliver them.

Efforts to articulate ‘British values’ are often juxtaposed with ‘radical’ or ‘extreme’ ideas, raising the question of whether holding radical attitudes is necessarily problematic. Rather than a security risk, exploring potentially ‘radical’ political ideas is, as van San et al. argue “a normal and necessary part of identity formation during adolescence” (van San, Sieckelink and de Winter, 2013, p.277). By framing particular categories of ideas as problematic there is a risk that airing such opinions becomes a “politically risky enterprise” (Coppock, 2014, p.123). This constrains the space within which young people might be able to develop the skills and awareness to critique dominant social practices and resist the reproduction of unequal or unjust social relations (Shor, 1992). The most damaging potential outcome, is that education becomes a form of social control, one that at its worst produces “citizens and workers who [are] conformist, passive and politically docile” (Harber and Sakade, 2009, p.173).

There is a tension between the increasing instrumentalisation of education concerned with creating good citizens in the service of social cohesion and countering terrorism, and the aim of fostering individual flourishing (Moulin, 2012). As Gearon (2010) argues in the context of religious education, where religion is seen to “cohere rather than critique the state, religion is not seen as true but useful” (p.107). A similar risk exists for notions of citizenship and, more broadly, ‘values’. By framing ambivalence towards a particular set of values as a security issue, there is the risk that learning to negotiate moral and social questions is guided by a political agenda that sees education in instrumental terms, rather than as a more broadly drawn public good.

Given the risks associated with the politicisation and securitisation of efforts to address extremism in education, what alternative mechanisms might be better able to bound how to negotiate difference? Existing academic approaches, whilst overlapping, tend to focus on one of three factors: the moral aspect of education (Aly, Taylor and Karnovsky, 2014); justice in the service of social cohesion (Gereluk, 2013); or the rights and responsibilities incumbent on citizens of a liberal democracy (Davies, 2009; Miller 2013). All three perspectives, if it is reasonable to call them that, are underpinned by a commitment to the importance of human rights and justice. While recognising the considerable benefits of a rights-based approach, some of the challenges it faces suggests there are benefits from incorporating aspects of an ethics of care in the effort to engage with extremism.

Lynn Davies argues for a secular foundation for judging values rooted in man-made frameworks relating to human rights and the rights of the child. This, she argues, “provides a framework for analysis and for the encouragement of debate about competing rights” (2009, p.193). Davies goes on to suggest that ‘tolerance’ and ‘respect’ – often central features of educational efforts to address extremism – are potentially unhelpful, as they are underpinned by a belief that one position is superior to another, and that one therefore needs to be ‘tolerated’. To avoid this, she argues for a commitment to a particular set of secular values on the basis of which a plurality of values are assessed. In this way, Davies makes the case for a foundation for debate that is “established by real people so that it can be contested rather than held up as sacred.” (2009, p.198). Against this backdrop, she argues that five types of criticality are necessary: critical scholarship, critical disrespect in the context of universal rights and responsibilities, critical thinking, doubt, and lightness. Drawing on Amartya Sen, Davies argues for the need to encourage and support each child’s understanding of themselves as unique and original in the context of developing hybrid identities:

Rather than push children into camps encouraging them to learn about Asian food or visits to the Sikh temple. The trick is to enhance the resistance to such simple labels and categorisations, and give children status by showing how original and special each of us is. (2009, p.189)

Encouraging young people to categorise themselves and others along broad ethnic, racial or religious lines is problematic, however an overemphasis on the individual is not without problems. Engagement in radical politics is fundamentally relational: it purports to act on behalf of others, it is often underpinned by close inter-personal ties, and can reflect a deep commitment to questions of social justice, albeit being prosecuted in ways that are antagonistic to the existing social order. Focusing on the individual and their uniqueness underplays the importance of these issues. It is at least as important to focus on fostering pro-social forms of relatedness that transcend broadly drawn identity boundaries, rather than either reinforcing them or placing too great an emphasis on the individual. Similarly, underpinning the argument in support of secular values is the assumption that they are neutral position from which to assess alternative perspectives. However, as Bradley argues, these are “one particular tradition of enquiry” (2013, p.68), the adoption of which still acts to bound the parameters by which value judgements are made.

Joyce Miller has also suggested that human rights provide the most appropriate foundation for engaging with questions raised at the intersection of religion, education and extremism (Miller, 2013). Whilst Miller seems less comfortable with the secular tenor of Davies’

approach, she agrees that human rights, in the shape of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, provide an appropriate framework for structuring schooling. Miller argues: “it is only in a school where the rights of the child are respected that sensitive and effective exploration of complex issues such as religiously inspired violent extremism can take place.” (2013, p.193). Miller goes on to suggest that human rights represent a foundation for examining individual beliefs, attitudes, and values to support moral development in a way that preserves human dignity and recognises the intrinsic worth of others.

Drawing on the work of Rawls, Dianne Gereluk (2013) argues that the foundation for debate about terrorism and extremism in schools should be a justice based one. Described as reasonable pluralism, boundaries are determined by the extent to which alternative views threaten to undermine the social order, so that “[t]eachers and schools can ... appropriately dissuade students from those private moral values that are intolerable and threaten the stability of society.” (2013, p.109). There is a tension between this approach and the effort to develop critical citizens, which at its worst may result in a politics reduced to what Henri Giroux describes as little more than “following orders, shaming those who make power accountable, and shutting down legitimate modes of dissent”. (2005, p.4). Although Gereluk makes the case that her approach does not preclude developing a critical awareness of the causes of political violence, by encouraging the consolidation of ‘public values’, there is a risk that young people’s scope for developing political agency becomes attenuated.

Anne Aly and her colleagues (2014) begin from a different premise to Davies, Miller, and Gereluk, arguing that those who become involved in political violence have gone through a process of moral disengagement where “individuals cognitively reconstruct the moral value of violence, putting aside self-sanctions, so that acts of violence can be committed” (Aly, Taylor and Karnovsky, 2014, p.374). Aly describes a pilot intervention ‘Beyond Bali’, that tries to develop resilience to this process. Alongside a number of other methods, including cognitive, behavioural, and knowledge based approaches, the aim is to prevent moral disengagement. ‘Beyond Bali’ is a potentially valuable and innovative approach to preventing extremism, and it will be important to learn from ongoing evaluations of the programme. However, the theoretical foundation of the intervention seems to face two challenges. The first is that those engaged in violence, as Aly et al., to some extent recognise, largely believe their actions to be moral. Increasing evidence is emerging about how, under certain circumstances, violence comes to be seen as virtuous (Fiske and Rai, 2015), and that people break social norms because they come to see them as a “‘service’ in the cause of ‘goodness’” (Haslam and Reicher, 2012, para. 23).

By starting from the premise, as Aly et al. (2014), and before them Albert Bandura (1990) do, that ‘normal’ socialisation is ‘good’ socialisation, such programmes are inherently normative. It may therefore be more appropriate to interpret the mechanism the Beyond Bali programme is imputing as one of supporting the individual’s commitment to dominant norms about violence, rather than understanding their behavior as moral disengagement per se. The second issue relates to how moral questions are interpreted. Aly et al. cite the work of Kohlberg (1984) and his use of moral dilemmas in exploring the psychological aspects of moral development. Laurence Kohlberg’s work has been the subject of much debate, most notably through the challenge from Carol Gilligan over the appropriateness of a moral framework which positions justice at the top of a moral hierarchy. Gilligan (1977) famously argued that Kohlberg’s model prioritises a particularly masculine account of morality focused on abstract

notions of justice, neglecting those principles of care and compassion more commonly reflected in women's engagement with moral questions. Hence, although valuable, *Beyond Bali* seems to offer a somewhat limited framework for making moral judgements, prioritising questions of justice in the context of an acceptance of wider social norms.

As this brief review demonstrates, there are different ways of understanding the most appropriate starting point for how to engage with questions of extremism in the context of value pluralism. Policy prescriptions are increasingly focused on the content of education and, in the UK, the need to instill 'fundamental British values'. Davies, Miller, and Gereluk, in related ways, suggest a framework of values based on human rights and justice. While the more multi-modal approach proposed by Aly et al. also seems to concentrate on achieving what Kohlberg would argue is a higher form of moral reasoning. Such approaches focus their efforts on establishing a foundation for debate centred on some of the abstract principles of justice and rights that Gilligan, and those who followed her, found problematic. They also prioritise the individual over the complex web of social relations in which he or she is embedded and, in some cases, risk reducing the space for young people to develop political agency and a more critical, engaged form of citizenship. To move forward, it is helpful to broaden the parameters within which debates over value pluralism take place. Alternative education provision delivered in the context of the Prevent agenda has important insights in this regard.

### **Alternative education**

Community organisations working with those considered 'at risk' of involvement in extremism, and those who have been involved in terrorism, embody some important practices relevant for mainstream education.<sup>1</sup> Their approach, although varied, is typically rooted in a mentoring relationship, through which issues relevant to the mentee are explored. These can relate to theological and political questions, but almost always extend beyond this to include personal and social issues. Mentors and mentees are commonly put together by statutory agencies such as the police or probation services. The aim of the intervention is to support the individual to move away from extremism and re-engage pro-socially with wider society. Many aspects of this process are explicitly educational, whether in relation to reorienting religious understanding, developing a deeper appreciation of the complexity of political and social issues, or more generally, promoting critical thinking. They also incorporate different approaches to negotiating difference, looking both to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, but importantly basing this in what in many cases is recognisably an ethics of care.

In order to engage effectively with beneficiaries, the community groups have to demonstrate credibility. This means establishing their independence from the state, and more importantly, demonstrating that they are committed to the individual. As one mentor explained when asked how he recognised they were making progress: "once a person realises that the reason why you're helping him is not because you have an agenda to keep, but rather because you care about him or her." (community mentor 1). This recognises that, as Nel Noddings has suggested, caring relations "come first ... virtues develop almost naturally out of those relations" (2002, p.5). Alongside this individual-level commitment, the groups often draw credibility from their position in the community. Importantly, this is not the sweeping 'Muslim community' often discussed, but a web of particular relationships that make up a

shared constituency to which they make a demonstrable contribution. In this way, the groups try to resist the security framework in which this work is embedded, as one organisation was described: “[they] aren’t interested in enforcement, they are interested in the person becoming a good Muslim in the community, teaching them about chivalry, money, how to fit into the community.” (Senior Probation Officer 1). These practices speak to some of the core issues of care ethics: the importance of a moral and personal commitment to particular others; an emphasis on relatedness and interdependence; accepting the importance of emotion; and a reconfiguring of the public and private (Held, 2005; Noddings, 2002). In this way, it is distinct from the justice and rights-oriented framework that informs many approaches to addressing extremism in educational settings, as Virginia Held explains:

An ethic of justice focuses on questions of fairness, equality, individual rights, abstract principles, and the consistent application of them. An ethic of care focuses on attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need, narrative nuance, and cultivating caring relations. Whereas an ethic of justice seeks a fair solution between competing individual interests and rights, an ethic of care sees the interests of carers and cared-for as importantly intertwined rather than as simply competing. (Held, 2006, p.15)

Although it is not possible to fully explore the extent and practice of an ethics of care in relation to third sector interventions, two features of this work have implications for mainstream education. First, developing critical thinking that is directed at the full range of political circumstances individuals encounter. This extends the focus of efforts to address extremism beyond individually held values or ideas to take account of the wider political and social context from which such values emerge (Ross, 2002). Second, nurturing political agency by fostering personal strengths in ways that resist the dominant risk-oriented framework. This underlines the intrinsic value of supporting human flourishing and resists the instrumentalisation of education in the service of security. These aims are advanced through dialogue and in the context of the relations that exist between people in an effort to create an environment where, in the words of Nel Noddings, “moral life can flourish” (2002, p.9).

### *Expanding the boundaries of critical thinking*

Repeated calls have been made for the need to develop critical thinking skills to counter extremism and conflict (United Nations, 1995). Community mentors and statutory partners largely share the view that developing such skills plays an important role in supporting disengagement from extremism (Marsden, 2015). Indeed, comparative work on ‘radicals’, ‘terrorists’, and ‘young Muslims’ suggests that those who have used violence have a less critical understanding of their religion than those who have not (Bartlett and Miller, 2012). Yet, given the range of educational profiles reflected in those involved in political violence, it seems unlikely that there are universal deficits that inform why some people become involved in extremism (Brockhoff, Krieger and Meierrieks, 2014; Krueger and Malečková, 2003).

As well as not accurately reflecting the diversity of individuals engaged in extremism, the stereotype of the uncritical, ‘vulnerable’ individual has the effect of widening the net for state intervention and neglects the agency central to much involvement in political violence (Richards, 2011). Whilst some may lack the skills necessary to critically interrogate information, many within militant circles engage in robust debate bearing the hallmarks of critical and analytical thought (Moghadam and Fishman, 2010). A more nuanced perspective

is possible by developing arguments about the ways in which critical thinking is informed by wider social norms and through examining the nature and direction of evaluations made by 'extremists'.

Defined as "the propensity and skill to engage in an activity with reflective skepticism" (McPeck, 1981, p.8), one of the areas of contention surrounding the concept of critical thinking is whether it is specific or general. Those who argue it is subject specific propose thinking skills should be developed in the context of particular domains of knowledge, whilst those who believe it is a general skill argue it should be understood and taught as a standalone subject (Abrami et al., 2008). The way critical thinking is conceptualised and applied to extreme or radical views extends the debate over how to approach the concept of criticality a little further. Beginning from the premise that wider norms influence what is an appropriate object for criticality (Bailin et al., 2009), it becomes possible to see how people might become extremely critical about particular issues in specific domains of experience.

Those involved in extremism are extremely critical of state practices. Community groups working with those at risk of involvement in extremism often share their concerns, as one mentor explained "[we say] we agree with you. This war was unjustifiable, innocent people are being killed, we relate to that, we relate to what's going on" (community mentor 6). From this shared starting point, mentors contextualise the mentee's views, setting them in their wider social and political context. Although the mentors had different techniques, three forms of contextualisation were important. First, the effort to set the mentee's views in the context of wider religious teachings about the appropriate response to injustice. As well as engaging with how to interpret religious texts, they highlighted the often weak legitimacy of those who promote extremism, in one mentor's words: "when you actually question do [violent ideologues] really understand? What are their credentials, to put themselves up there [on a pedestal]? That makes a lot of people re-evaluate their attachment to them" (community mentor 2).

Second, the community groups try to set the mentee's views in the context of the British political system and the opportunities it provides for addressing grievances, for example, suggesting: "if you have problems, there are other ways of dealing with it. If you don't like foreign policies, don't vote for them ... have a discussion with your friends, family, and say ... we will not let them govern us anymore" (community organisation leader 3). Finally, they try to reduce the distance between identity groups that informs much extremist rhetoric by demonstrating that many non-Muslims share their views about political issues, reminding them that "1 million people went to Hyde Park, were they Muslims? Probably five per cent were Muslims. They were all white, local, Christians, Jews, Hindus, non-Muslim people protesting against the war in Iraq" (community organisation leader 7).

What is interesting about these perspectives is that mentees are not necessarily uncritical, nor are they alone in their concerns. Rather, their critical faculties are narrowly focused, directed at a specific set of state practices that persuade them of the need for radical change. By implication, efforts to engage with those who hold 'extreme' views are involved in an effort to broaden the direction and object of critical thought rather than necessarily trying to develop such skills in the first place.

What this draws attention to is that, as Bailin et al., argue: “critical thinking is in some sense good thinking” (2009, p.288). ‘Good thinking’ is that which does not trespass far beyond the norms of wider society, and which directs its attention at ideas and behaviours reflecting commonly shared understandings of moral wrongs. Even less controversial positions, such as whether the pledge of allegiance should be compulsorily sung in schools in America (Apple, 2002), or the extent of critical reflection on the ‘causes and contexts’ of 9/11 in educational responses to the attacks as they adapted curricula to ‘aid the war against terrorism’, reflect these issues (Brisard and Dasquie, 2002). Whilst some critical debate is encouraged and championed, boundaries remain. As a consequence, the space within which young people can develop engaged and critical citizenship becomes increasingly attenuated.

Together, these arguments suggest that education’s role lies not in enforcing commitment to certain types of values, but in creating a space where those values can be constructed and critiqued. Crucially, this needs to take account, not only of the ‘extreme’ ideas reflected in different forms of radicalism, but also the broader political and social setting which produces them. Rather than asking questions about which values are important and how they might be defended, this approach begins by asking why do particular values become salient and to what effect, and how might we negotiate different value claims relationally and sensitively?

Widening the scope of debate in the ways the community groups do seems liable to foster what Ross (2002) describes as a space that enables ‘respectful listening’ in order to bridge our own and the wider world. Such work is not easy, and has been described as a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ that should seek to push “the individual to think and feel far beyond the personal and understand how the individual is situated in a globalized history” (Zembylas and Boler, 2002, para. 7). In this way it is perhaps possible to resist the effort to instill particular forms of values by placing their discussion in a much broader socio-political context in the effort to foster political agency and critical citizenship.

#### *Political agency and critical citizens*

Risk has become the ubiquitous framework for engaging with security issues, even in the realm of education. It is a notion fraught with problems; not only does it identify ‘risky subjects’ and justify external intervention (Coppock, 2014), it typically implies there is some kind of problem, or deficit, which might be addressed in the effort to develop ‘resilience’. In this way it is possible to see the “would-be-terrorist collid[ing] powerfully with institutionalised discourses of childhood vulnerability.” (Coppock and McGovern, 2014, p.248). Another challenge to the risk-oriented approach is the difficulty in identifying verified ‘risk indicators’ able to identify behaviours or attitudes linked to extremism (Marsden, 2015). Moreover, the focus on assessing risk and developing resilience neglects the agency associated with involvement in extremism, it also seems less likely to motivate and engage young people. Instead it seems important to support their own agency in the service of positive change. In the words of one practitioner:

The programmes are about the fact that change happens internally, we can provide a forum for what happens, but they are in control of their own intervention. It’s about someone realising that they’re in control, not subject to reprogramming. (Probation Officer 5).

As I argue at length elsewhere (Marsden, 2016), nurturing strengths, such as the development of a positive personal identity and pro-social interpersonal networks, enables young people to pursue fulfilling futures more effectively than managing and assessing risk. This is enabled in different ways by the community groups, sensitive to the individual and their circumstances. However, what they share is an effort to understand the motives that led to their involvement in extremism and a desire to foster political agency in support of pro-social outcomes. For example, if someone is motivated by questions of social justice and has come to believe radical political change is necessary, finding pro-social avenues for addressing injustice can be helpful. As van San et al. argue, a “young radical [is] someone in search of an active citizenship role” (van San, Sieckelinck and de Winter, 2013, p. 278) and should first and foremost be treated as a politically engaged individual.

Throughout the community groups’ work, there is an emphasis on fulfilling human potential rather than controlling risk, and doing so in way informed by interpersonal commitment and an effort to embed the individual in a network of positive social relations. One community group leader explained this to be an important part of recognising progress: “when they can identify with us, they trust in us, they feel we are part of the community, we are part them, they’re part of us” (community group leader 1).

Situating questions of extremism in the context of an ethic of care, the effort to support human flourishing and develop political agency, fundamentally changes the questions we ask. Rather than asking: who is a risk? How might we identify them? And how might we best intervene to build resilience? We ask instead: what are you going through? How can we help? What do you need to fulfil your potential? In this way, there is a shift away from generalised forms of assessment concerned with identifying risk and addressing perceived deficits, towards an engagement rooted in interpersonal relationships concerned with enabling them to recognise moral interdependence and reciprocity seeking to achieve “compassionate reintegration into the community” (community mentor 6).

The most important feature of this shift in emphasis is the way it resists the instrumentalisation of efforts to address extremism. By starting from the importance of developing strengths in the service of human flourishing and political agency, community mentors are able to reaffirm their commitment to the intrinsic value of the individual and their potential. Starting from an ethic of care that pays attention to the fundamental relatedness of those involved in the process, the importance of emotion, and of interacting with empathy and sensitivity (Noddings, 2002) are all ways of supporting positive outcomes. Developed through approaches rooted in particular social relations rather than abstract values, such work resonates with Mary Catherine Bateson’s belief that “the encounter with persons, one by one, rather than categories and generalities, is still the best way to cross lines of strangeness” (Bateson, 2000, p.81). In this way, community groups try and develop an individual’s strengths to enable them to engage more pro-socially with society, ultimately seeking to achieve a situation where “that person can express that it is acceptable to differ without being violent, or without there being some kind of conspiracy” (community mentor 5).

## **Conclusion**

Drawing on the methods used by community mentors engaged with those considered ‘at risk’ of involvement in extremism, this chapter has explored the content and parameters of how

education might engage with contentious political questions in the context of value pluralism. Community-based groups demonstrate the importance of beginning with a commitment to the individual that is rooted in a set of caring relations. In this way, they try to resist security imperatives by seeking to broaden the object of critical thinking to explore how and why particular ideas are valued and others proscribed. This capacity to think critically and understand how the individual is positioned in a wider set of political and social relations through a narrative imagination able to empathise and understand another's perspective is an important feature of education (Nussbaum, 1998). Such approaches acknowledge the centrality of interpersonal relationships with particular others and have much to offer existing rights and justice based efforts.

Community mentors' work focuses attention on the importance of developing personal strengths in order to foster political agency. This differs from approaches that see a commitment to radical ideas as a function of deficits understood in terms of individual level risk factors in need of correction. Here, the guiding principle is the intrinsic value of supporting human flourishing as opposed to developing resilience in the service of a wider security agenda. Crucially, such efforts recognise the relational setting within which questions of extremism are negotiated. This shifts the location of this work from the individual to the network of social relations in which they are embedded, and draws attention to the importance of spaces where the conditions for honest debate and disagreement are met. In this way, it becomes possible to problematise, not only attitudes that support violence, or the actions of violent people, but also the state's response to those circumstances with a view to fostering political agents able to critique and respond constructively to the actions of all those involved in conflict in the context of a shared social project.

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<sup>i</sup> The research referred to in the chapter was carried out between 2007 and 2015 and involved over 30 interviews with community-based mentors and statutory practitioners working with those 'at risk' of involvement in extremism and those convicted of terrorism offences. For details of the methodology see Marsden (2015) and for a full account of this research see Marsden (2016).