Prevent as an Intractable Policy Controversy: Implications and Solutions

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Abstract

Academic literature on the Prevent counter-radicalisation strategy has long been dominated by negative voices. Whilst these authors have made important criticisms of the strategy, this literature has often neglected insights from those who deliver Prevent, which has left a seemingly intractable gap between critics and supporters of the strategy. To address this empirical weakness in the existing literature, this paper analyses interviews with 12 individuals employed to deliver Prevent at the local authority level, and in doing so discusses the potential for bridging this gap between critics and supporters of Prevent through empirical research. Using Donald Schön and Martin Rein's work on policy framing as its theoretical framework, this paper presents counter-radicalisation as an 'intractable policy controversy' in which protagonists hold strongly-held, and opposing, views on the morality of Prevent. However, through an analysis of the interview data, the paper outlines some potential foundations for fostering meaningful engagement between critical and positive voices that need not undermine the strongly-held moral convictions of either side. In doing so, the paper concludes by arguing that a different approach to analysing Prevent rooted in empirical investigation will be needed if we are to move an increasingly stale debate on the strategy forward in a meaningful way.

Introduction

In 2017, academics from three universities released a report entitled, 'What the Prevent Duty Means for Schools and Colleges in England' (Busher et al., 2017). This study investigated how these institutions were responding to the 'Prevent Duty', introduced by the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, that placed them, and a wealth of other sectors, under a statutory duty to have, 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism' (Home Office, 2015a: 2). Whilst the report was balanced, it concluded, 'those

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'broadly supportive of Prevent and the Prevent Duty' were just as likely to view the findings as vindication as 'those broadly critical of Prevent' (Busher et al., 2017: 65-66). That this safety warning had to be included was indicative of the entrenched nature of a long debate over the virtue of the UK government's counter-radicalisation strategy, Prevent (Home Office, 2011).

The public response to this report was telling. Whilst several outlets led with headlines speaking of teachers' concerns about the potential stigmatisation of Muslim pupils (Weale, 2017), supporters of Prevent used the report findings to defend the strategy (McElroy, 2018). This was symptomatic of the divisive nature of the discourse that has existed around Prevent since it was first introduced in 2003. In the UK, radicalisation has become an 'intractable policy controversy' (Schön and Rein, 1994) that is, a debate contested between two entrenched sides, and which is unresolvable by appealing to empirical 'facts'.

This paper attempts to explain the intractability of this controversy, and discusses the scope for fostering meaningful dialogue between critics and policy actors by drawing on interviews conducted with 12 local Prevent officials. Using Donald Schön and Martin Rein's work on policy frames as its framework (Schön and Rein, 1994), this analysis finds some space for critics and supporters to coalesce around a shared ethical commitment that places primacy on the safety of the individual over the state (Jackson, Breen-Smyth and Gunning, 2009: 226). In doing so, it does not attempt to 'prove' the validity of one side's position, but instead argues that empirical research can potentially shape the strategy in positive ways. Crucial to this project will be those delivering Prevent on-the-ground, who are both 'policy-makers' and 'policy-takers' (Jackson, Breen-Smyth and Gunning, 2009: 226), that is, subject to policy yet retaining the ability to shape delivery. However, to date only a limited number of existing studies include insights from such practitioners (Elshimi, 2015; Thornton and Bouhana, 2017; Innes, Roberts and Lowe, 2017; Weeks, 2018).

This paper therefore attempts to contribute to this literature. Whilst conscious that my approach potentially biases the paper, I argue that a focus on Prevent officials is important given the relative absence of such insights within the existing literature when compared to

critical voices.[2] In this paper, I argue that critics and supporters of Prevent can potentially find common ground without having to give up strongly-held moral convictions. However, this will rest on each side critically reflecting on their own assumptions. To this end, it is important to begin this discussion with a brief overview of the criticisms made of Prevent since it was introduced.

The Prevent Strategy and Criticism

Prevent is one of four strands of the counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST (Home Office, 2018a) first introduced by Tony Blair's Labour Government in 2003 (HM Government, 2006). CONTEST was the first national strategy to combine traditional, 'harder', counter-terrorism measures (termed Pursue, Prepare and Protect) with 'softer' measures aimed at 'Preventing terrorism by tackling the radicalisation of individuals' (Prevent) (HM Government, 2006: 1). The first public version was published in 2006 following the terrorist attacks of 7/7, before being updated in 2009 under Gordon Brown's Labour Government (HM Government, 2009).

Following the 2010 General Election, David Cameron's Coalition Government published a revised strategy in 2011 (Home Office, 2011), which was updated in the summer of 2018 (Home Office, 2018a). All fieldwork for this study was conducted prior to this most recent update. As such, this section predominantly focuses on the versions of Prevent published under Labour in 2006 and 2009 ('Prevent I') and the revised version published in 2011 ('Prevent II'). However, it also draws on the most recent strategy document from 2018 ('Prevent III') in parts.

Prevent has been heavily criticised since its inception. This criticism has often focused on its practical implementation, the blurring of community cohesion and security agendas in earlier versions of Prevent (Thomas, 2009: 282), or the stigmatisation of Muslim communities resulting from allocating early funding to areas with large Muslim populations (Heath-Kelly,

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[2] Thus, whilst the author has also interviewed six academics who have conducted their own research into Prevent, this paper focuses on the interviews conducted with Prevent practitioners.

2012: 77). Other criticisms are more conceptual, focusing on the government's definition of radicalisation (Kundnani, 2012: 3). However, whilst the core goal of Prevent remains broadly unchanged, 'to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism' (Home Office, 2011: 10), the most recent versions of Prevent are substantially different from earlier versions. Perhaps most notable has been the formal separation from Community Cohesion, and a broadening focus onto all forms of extremism since 2011 (Home Office, 2011: 6, 13-15).

A more contentious change was the introduction of a definition of 'extremism' in 2011, which widened the remit of Prevent from explicitly violent ideologies to 'extremism' even if 'non-violent' (Edwards, 2015: 55), defined as 'views opposed to Fundamental British Values' (Home Office, 2011: 107). Unsurprisingly, this definition has been critiqued as being too broad, with many questioning this relationship between 'extremism' and 'terrorism' (Richards, 2015: 371).[3] These criticisms have only strengthened since the introduction of the Prevent Duty, with many lamenting the securitisation of everyday institutions (O'Donnell, 2016; Durodie, 2016). Most contentious has been the subsequent rise in referrals to the Government's Channel counter-radicalisation programme, with figures released in 2017 showing that between April 2015 and March 2016, there were 7,631 referrals (Home Office, 2017), versus only 3,934 between April 2007 and March 2014 (NPCC, 2014).[4] Since that peak, referrals began to fall in 2016/17 (Home Office, 2018b). However, as only 5% of these cases went on to be supported through Channel, there remain concerns about spurious referrals (Singh, 2016), particularly from the education sector, which accounted for one-third of all referrals over this period.

This criticism has been exacerbated by a noted lack of transparency around Prevent. The publication of those Channel statistics above is a positive step in this regard. However,

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[3] Notably, that definition of extremism has been removed from the most recent version of CONTEST, with 'extremism' now defined as a 'strategic factor' (Home Office, 2018a: 33). There was an apparent separation of Prevent from counter-extremism more broadly in 2015 with the publication of the first Counter-Extremism Strategy (Home Office, 2015b). However, Prevent is still framed as 'one part of a wider effort to counter broader extremist messages and behaviours' (Home Office, 2018a: 23), so the distinction remains unclear.

[4] It important to note that Channel began as a pilot in 2007, and was only rolled out nationally in 2012, before becoming a statutory duty for all local authorities in 2015 (HM Government, 2015: 2-5). This means the figures are not directly comparable, but are still highly illustrative.

James Lewis: Prevent as an Intractable Policy Controversy: Implications and Solutions

the government's former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation David Anderson believes that the secrecy with which Prevent has been held, 'encourages rumour and mistrust to spread and to fester' (Anderson, 2016). Of course, to some extent this lack of transparency is understandable, as given the subject matter, confidentiality is of utmost importance. Similarly, the difficulty of evaluating programmes designed to prevent violent extremism has long been noted (Marsden, Lewis and Knott, 2017: 6). Indeed, individual intervention providers' perceptions of what constitutes success may often differ from the Government's own metrics (Weeks, 2018: 537). Nevertheless, to-date, the government has yet to heed Anderson's calls for an independent evaluation of the strategy (Anderson, 2016) and, as such, publicly available studies evaluating Prevent are now dated, focusing on earlier versions of the strategy (Alam and Husband, 2012; Iacopini, Stock and Junge 2011; Thomas, 2012).

Greater transparency will be essential if we are to truly understand the efficacy of Prevent (Dryden, 2017: 127). Whilst they may have some trepidation, this may also prove beneficial to those who deliver the strategy, as, in the absence of up-to-date evidence, it becomes easier to criticise, and harder to defend, Prevent. There has been a noted reluctance from government to champion the strategy in public (Casey, 2016: 155), which means that whilst criticism of Prevent has been routine, there is a long-noted absence of positive voices. Thus, whilst this paper retains critical distance from Prevent, it specifically investigates this positive voice.

Methodology

This paper emerged from the author's PhD research into the operation of the Prevent Duty in educational institutions. Anonymous interviews were conducted with 12 officials delivering Prevent locally in eight different local authority areas in England between September 2017 and February 2018.[5] All interviews were conducted in Prevent Priority Areas, perceived by

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[5] Whilst most of those interviewed worked in a dedicated Prevent function, in some cases Prevent work was just one element of their role. As such, some participants may reject the notion that they are a 'Prevent Official', but this term is used in this paper as short-hand.

the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT) to have the highest level of perceived radicalisation risk[6]. Interviews were conducted with practitioners in a variety of roles, including local Prevent Coordinators and individuals in dedicated education support positions.

Prevent Coordinators have oversight over the delivery of Prevent at the local authority level. The precise role of those Coordinators interviewed as part of this study varied, as some took a more strategic role in delivering Prevent, whilst others were more hands-on. However, all Coordinators sat on local multi-agency Channel panels, in which cases referred to the Channel programme were discussed, and support needs assessed. In the context of my research into education, the range of more hands-on tasks that a Coordinator might perform to support schools varied, but would commonly include delivering training and responding to ad hoc requests for support and guidance, alongside a range of other tasks locally.

The education officials interviewed supported educational institutions to implement and deliver Prevent. This would often include many of these same hands-on tasks as performed by Coordinators, as well as, in some instances, developing dedicated curriculum resources for institutions, running working groups for educators or pupils, or attending specific events in schools or colleges. In terms of training, this was predominantly delivering the Government's Workshop to Raise Awareness of Prevent (WRAP) sessions, tailored to the specific local contexts, but could also include refresher training, more bespoke training or educational programmes, or 'train the trainer' sessions (training individuals to deliver Prevent training). There tended to be a division of labour between Coordinators and education officials, with the latter taking on the bulk of responsibility for supporting education institutions, but this varied across local authorities – in some cases education officials would take almost sole responsibility for their sector, but this tended to be rare. Notably, whilst the precise approach to delivery varied, several participants sat on regional networks that bridged local authorities, through which they shared best practice, or discussed emerging issues.

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[6] The OSCT assigns all local authorities as 'Priority' or 'Non-Priority' areas depending on their perceived level of risk (Home Office, 2011: 10). In some cases, participants worked across multiple local authority areas, which might include both 'Priority' and 'Non-Priority' areas.

Potential participants were identified from the personal networks of the author, before additional individuals were identified through snowball sampling, or through online searches. All participants were approached using a standardised email (which included a detailed information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, how their data would be used and stored, and the procedure for withdrawal). A semi-structured interviewing approach was used, with seven participants interviewed face-to-face (four individually, and three as a triad) and five over the telephone. Interviews used a topic guide, that included core questions about the individual's background and role, experiences of working with educational institutions, and their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the Prevent Duty. Everyone contacted who was willing to be interviewed was included.

The semi-structured approach ensured that each of these themes were covered in detail, whilst allowing flexibility to discuss any issues that emerged during the interviews, which lasted up to 90 minutes. This included the broader debate about Prevent, which was not a core focus of the questioning, but regularly emerged in discussions across the interviews. Interviews operated according to the principle of informed consent, with all participants signing a consent form after reading the participant information sheet.[7] Seven of the ten interviews were audio recorded and immediately transcribed by the researcher to ensure views were recorded accurately before being anonymised and assigned a unique participant number, and checked for accuracy. Three of the interviews were not audio recorded.[8] Here, detailed notes were taken and immediately digitised by the researcher, before being anonymised and assigned a unique participant number. All documents were then analysed in order to answer two key questions:

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[7] The consent form asked participants to confirm that they had read and understood the information sheet. It then asked them to confirm that they understood that participation was entirely voluntary (and that they could withdraw at any time during the interview, and up to two weeks after the interview had taken place), and that any information they provided would be anonymised so that they could not be identified in any datafile or research output (with the form specifying that any information given may be used in future publications or presentations). It also asked for consent for the interviews to be audio-recorded and transcribed, and clearly outlined how the data would be stored (and for how long). Finally, it explicitly asked participants to agree to take part in the study.

[8] The reason for not recording varied. The first two interviews were initially treated as pilot interviews, but the depth of the data collected meant they were included in data analysis, whilst the final interview was conducted outside of the main data collection period, and so was mainly used to complement the data already collected from the other 11 participants.

James Lewis: Prevent as an Intractable Policy Controversy: Implications and Solutions

1. How do practitioners frame their work within Prevent?

2. Is there any evidence of frame reflection or of potential for frame synthesis with critics?

Analysis was loosely based on the process of 'Thematic Analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Transcripts and notes were read and re-read to draw out sections of text related to these two questions. This text was then analysed for key themes across the interviews. In some instances, a 'key' theme would be commonly occurring across the interviews (such as the framing of Prevent as safeguarding), but the 'keyness' of a theme was determined based on whether it, 'captures something important in relation to the overall research question' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 82). Thus, some of the patterned themes discussed below were less prevalent (such as discussions around colonialism), but still considered 'key' in addressing one or more questions.[9]

Given the small sample size, and the limited geographic spread, I do not argue that the findings are generalisable, or representative of all those delivering Prevent. Instead, I hope this discussion outlines potential avenues for research by drawing on Schön and Rein's work on 'intractable policy controversies' (Schön and Rein, 1994). This paper now outlines the framework's utility for explaining the Prevent debate, before applying it to the interview data.

Prevent as an 'Intractable Policy Controversy'

Schön and Rein offer two defining characteristics of policy controversies. Firstly, they argue that, 'parties to a controversy employ different strategies of selective attention', noting how one's view of the issue influences, 'which facts are deemed relevant' (Schön and Rein, 1994: 4). Secondly, they argue that, 'even when the parties to a controversy focus their attention on the same facts, they tend to give them different interpretations' (Schön and Rein, 1994: 5). In this section, I argue that the debate on Prevent is characterised by these features, and that

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[9] Whilst not discussed in detail here, the recruitment and interview methods for the interviews with academics researching Prevent (see footnote 2) were identical to what is discussed here.

Schön and Rein's work is a useful lens through which to analyse the discourse around Prevent.

Policy debates that appear immune to resolution are often normative (Scholten and Van Nispen, 2008: 184), with analysts coining the phrase 'morality policy' to describe the regulation of issues such as abortion and gun ownership (Knill, 2013: 310). The principle of 'rights' is often central to these debates, and the same is true of a public debate around Prevent that is characterised by a 'public clash of private values' (Mooney, 2001) in which one's position on the strategy seems to be heavily influenced by a pre-existing perspective on what is 'right'. Thus, whilst some view the strategy as unethical for undermining human rights (Singh 2016: 50), others point to a moral obligation to safeguard people from radicalisation (Javid, 2018). Such adoption of moral superiority often leads to divisions between two entrenched sides who firmly believe in the validity of their own position (Scholten and Van Nispen, 2008: 184).

Schön and Rein argue these positions rest on, 'underlying structures of belief, perception, and appreciation' which they called 'frames', and that policy disputes arise where, 'contending parties hold conflicting frames' which are often tacit (Schön and Rein, 1994: 23). Crucially, the holding of a frame is intertwined with one's personal identity (Van Hulst and Yanow, 2016: 102) in a dialectic way. Perceived identify impacts how one frames a particular issue, with frames simultaneously becoming part of someone's identity (Dekker, 2017: 130). The result is that changing one's stance on an issue means individuals risk, 'losing a part of who they are' (Van Hulst and Yanow, 2016: 102), which makes changing one's position inherently difficult.

By viewing controversies as frame conflicts, Schön and Rein argue that disputes between sides are 'resistant to resolution by appeal to facts' precisely because 'the parties' conflicting frames determine what counts as a fact and what arguments are taken to be relevant and compelling' (Schön and Rein, 1994: 23). Thus, how one perceives of an issue at the outset determines how you interpret what you see. Within Social Movement Theory this notion of 'frames' has been used to study the role of ideology in radicalisation and counter-

radicalisation (Snow and Byrd, 2007; Clubb, 2016), but it has not yet been applied to the reception of policies in this field. As such, it presents a useful framework through which to analyse the discourse around Prevent.

Frames determine both the issue, and its solution (Schön and Rein, 1994: 28). In this way, problem definitions are not objectively given, but are themselves produced by a frame (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016: 105). If 'radicalisation' causes terrorism, then 'counter-radicalisation' strategies such as Prevent are the assumed solution (Heath-Kelly et al., 2015: 1). Yet, if radicalisation is disputed as a concept, then the legitimacy of Prevent is undermined. At a higher level of abstraction, some also denounce Prevent as, through their frames, they interpret the strategy to serve Islamophobic or neo-conservative agendas (Sian, 2017: 1; Breen, 2018). This is indicative of what Schön and Rein term 'multiple social realities' (Schön and Rein, 1994: 28) rooted in markedly different, and conflicting, interpretations of so-called 'facts'.

There are multiple different frames which may shape one's position both on the validity of conducting empirical research, or its power to improve the strategy. For example, since the introduction of the Prevent Duty, several scholars have analysed its operation in education through the framework of Critical Race Theory or CRT (Breen, 2018), which rests on an assumption that 'policy functions to sustain 'race' inequalities across education' (Breen, 2018: 31). Thus, to identify as a 'Critical Race Theorist', is to strive to uncover, and challenge the racism inherent in society. As such, any data collection will be rooted in an emancipatory goal, yet such authors would dispute the notion that such data could improve Prevent, given the strategy would be viewed as a symptom of broader race inequality and thus illegitimate.

For some authors, research is never neutral, as it will be shaped by the researcher's own value positions (Tarling, 2006: 162). This rejection of positivism underpins many critical studies of terrorism, including those on Prevent, which often start from an assumption that research is shaped by ideology (Jackson, Breen-Smyth and Gunning, 2009: 224). Critical scholars have long spoken against the immorality of counter-terrorism, with some choosing to eschew engagement with policy actors on these grounds. For example, Richard Jackson

argues, 'it is virtually impossible to maintain an ethical commitment to human rights, human welfare, non-violence, and progressive politics – that is, emancipation – while simultaneously participating in an inherently violent and counter-emancipatory regime of counterterrorism' (Jackson, 2016: 122). For some authors, engagement with policy actors may be illegitimate. Yet, this view is not universal, with Harmonie Toros advocating for critical scholarly engagement with policy actors, despite sharing concerns about the immorality of counter-terrorism (Toros, 2016: 126).[10]

Here Toros speaks of 'praxis', 'the transformation of the world by putting theory into practice' (Toros and Gunning, 2009: 104). Toros argued that praxis can be wholly compatible with an emancipatory goal when taking the form of 'immanent critique and the search for fissures and internal contradictions',[11] and that emancipatory research has the power to 'foster and promote change' (Toros, 2016: 127). Whilst Toros has previously recognised the risks of 'going native' when engaging with policy actors, she has called for, 'emancipatory partnerships with traditional security communities' (Toros and Gunning, 2009: 105-106). I share that view.

In this way, frames can be positive and assist scholars in uncovering injustice, or driving change. Indeed, retaining criticality is important, as such analyses continue to add value, particularly those reconceptualising older debates (Taylor, 2018). However, frames also tacitly shape interpretations of 'facts'. In a recent paper, Greer and Bell speak of the 'myths and misconceptions' within the public discourse around Prevent (Greer and Bell, 2018: 104). Here, they discuss how some incidents are interpreted and framed by the 'Anti-Prevent Movement' in very particular ways. For example, they note how some authors have cited the case of Mohammed Umar Farooq, a Muslim student at Staffordshire University, being questioned by staff for reading a textbook on terrorism, to argue that Prevent violates

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[10] Yet, Toros stops short of arguing that all academics should engage with policy-makers, only that some should (Toros, 2016: 130). In this same way, I do not criticise authors who choose not to engage with such voices, but instead argue that increasing dialogue may be beneficial.

[11] Immanent critique is a 'method of inquiry that engages with the core commitments of particular discourses, ideologies, or institutional arrangements on their own terms, in the process of locating possibilities for radical change within a particular existing order' (McDonald, 2009: 113).

James Lewis: Prevent as an Intractable Policy Controversy: Implications and Solutions

human rights (Greer and Bell, 2018: 99). The incident certainly seems troubling – the University apologised after conducting their own investigation (Ramesh and Halliday, 2015) – but the authors argue that claims that Prevent violates human rights are, 'easy to make, but much more difficult to substantiate' (Greer and Bell, 2018: 98).

As such, they point to several alternative explanations (which themselves are difficult to substantiate) for this incident, pointing to nuances within Human Rights Law, or potential teething problems in the implementation of Prevent (rather than a flaw at the heart of the strategy) (Greer and Bell, 2018: 99). The discussion of this incident – both by critics, and by Greer and Bell – speaks directly to the power of frames within this debate. Viewed through a critical lens, this case becomes a stick with which to beat Prevent, yet those opposing this narrative will interpret this incident very differently. Here then, authors will selectively attend to, and subjectively interpret, specific details of a case. This to be expected, as there is often much nuance within such incidents. However, in other cases, the framing seems more dubious.

This issue was raised in several interviews with both practitioners and academics, who often spoke of the inaccuracy of some of the most high-profile cases used to denounce the strategy. Most prevalent was the 2016 'Terrorist House' case, where it was reported that a 10-year-old Muslim boy was questioned by Prevent police officers after writing, 'I live in a terrorist house' when he had meant 'terraced house' (Snowdon, 2016). However, it later emerged that no Prevent referral had been made, and that concerns had been raised by the boy writing, 'I hate it when my uncle beats me' (BBC, 2016). Nevertheless, one participant noted how they had recently heard one organisation, 'quote the 'terrorist house' thing at length', despite the fact it had been, 'completely disproved'. The continued perpetuation of this case was therefore criticised in several interviews as being either dishonest (by fault or by design), or unhelpful. However, when viewed through Schön and Rein's framework, it is unsurprising as frames are aligned with actors' interests (Schön and Rein, 1994: 29). Hence, we can see how propagating this case serves the interests of those opposed to Prevent, and how particular

interests in turn influence one's interpretation of, and selective attention to, the details in such dubious cases.

Indeed, the framework is also helpful for understanding the positions taken by supporters of the strategy, most notably how inconclusive evidence was used to justify the extension of Prevent into schools in the aftermath of the 2014 'Trojan Horse' affair, a supposed plot by Islamist extremists to take over the governance of schools in Birmingham (Education Select Committee, 2015: 5). There are multiple social realities at play here. Whilst for some it remains a prevalent case of the attempted 'Islamification' of education, others have spoken out against what they see as ulterior agendas (Holmwood and O'Toole, 2018). Certainly, whilst multiple investigations found no clear evidence of attempts to radicalise pupils, the case in part drove the introduction of Prevent into schools in 2015 (Education Select Committee, 2015: 14). As such, the same evidence used to criticise Prevent was cited to recommend its extension, pointing to the difficulty of 'proving' the validity of either side through empirical research.

Within this context, it is unsurprising that this debate has become increasingly entrenched between two sides suffering from the same characteristics identified by Schön and Rein, selective attention and subjective interpretations. This has seen the discourse around Prevent become stagnant, falling into a clear pattern of point and counter-point, and dominated by familiar and 'well-rehearsed' arguments (Tribe, 1991: 6). In recent years both Nazir Afzal, a former Chief Crown Prosecutor, and Mark Rowley, National Lead for Counter-Terrorism Policing, have criticised some organisations for using false accusations to undermine Prevent (Lusher, 2017; Dearden, 2018). In both instances, Prevent critics responded to this criticism by doubling down on these supposed myths, and pointing to an Islamophobic agenda at the heart of Prevent (Qureshi, 2017; Thomas-Johnson, 2018). This dynamic is unhelpful. This paper is therefore an attempt to explore potential avenues for moving beyond these well-rehearsed arguments by encouraging empirically-informed and meaningful dialogue between both sides.

James Lewis: Prevent as an Intractable Policy Controversy: Implications and Solutions

In truth, it is unlikely that bridging the gap between the most entrenched protagonists in this debate is possible. However, whilst it is tempting to view this discourse in binary terms, the positions taken are driven by multiple different framings of the issue (Schön and Rein, 1994: 35). Whilst critical scholars often make similar arguments to staunchly anti-Prevent organisations when criticising Prevent (Kundnani, 2015; Heath-Kelly, 2012), there is much heterogeneity in the positions taken. Those who criticise Prevent may do so on ideological, moral or political grounds, but they may also hold empirically-informed concerns. Increased dialogue between the latter and policy actors may be key for improving Prevent. Whilst frames seemingly limit the ability to listen to the arguments of one's opponents, Schön and Rein's framework allows space for frames to change over time (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016: 97) through what they term 'frame reflection':

> '[H]uman beings can reflect on and learn about the game of policy making even as they play it, and, more specifically, that they are capable of reflecting *in action* on the frame conflicts that underlie controversies and account for their intractability' (Schön and Rein, 1994: 37).

Through an analysis of the interview data, this paper assesses the potential for Prevent officials to 'reflect in action', and to recognise, 'how their own actions may exacerbate contention, contribute to stalemate, and trigger extreme pendulum swings, or, on the contrary, how their actions might help to resolve the frame conflicts that underlie stubborn policy disputes' (Schön and Rein, 1994: 37-8). It also explores the potential for 'frame synthesis' between opposing sides. For Schön and Rein, this occurs in different ways. Firstly, those with competing frames 'may also be struck by similar perceptions of their policy situation' (Schön and Rein, 1994: 175). That is, despite interpreting 'facts' in different ways, this does not prohibit some shared understanding of a particular issue. Secondly, they argue that shared perceptions of an issue may allow actors to 'put themselves in the shoes of other actors' (Schön and Rein, 1994: 175). A shared commitment to normative goals may therefore form the basis for coalescence here.

Thus, whilst protagonists on both sides may offer what they see as 'rational' arguments in defense of their position, the assumption that this rationality is somehow indisputable needs to be challenged (Hisschemöller and Hoppe, 1995: 49). Bridging this gap rests on recognising how one's rational argument may be perceived as irrational by opponents. Evidence of such flexibility amongst practitioners has not yet been analysed. However, there has been a notable shift in how some academics position themselves in this debate. As such, before discussing the interview data, this paper discusses the emerging frames in more recent research on Prevent.

An Emerging 'Middle Ground'

Some of Prevent's earliest academic critics have defended the strategy against more unjust criticism. For example, Paul Thomas, whose early work was critical of the strategy (Thomas, 2012), notes that much of the critical literature ignores the changes that have been made to Prevent since its inception, and makes the point that, 'This doesn't imply that Prevent is now more positive… rather that it is significantly different and that understanding both the nature and experiences of these changes matters' (Thomas, 2017: 306). This is an important point, however the discourse around the strategy often seems to construct 'Prevent' as a monolithic entity that is ultimately to be defended, or criticised, depending on one's framing of the issue.

This is apparent in recent research on Prevent. The Prevent Duty has led an increasing number of authors from fields such as education (Panjwani et al., 2018) and social work (Stanley and Guru, 2015) to engage with the topic.[12] This is promising, as such authors have the potential to offer fresh insights, particularly as many of these studies have investigated how Prevent is practiced, and in doing so have furthered the empirical evidence-base (Lander, 2016; Bryan, 2017). However, many of these critiques are no different to those that have existed since 2011, as new authors often focus on problematising the definition of extremism

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[12] This is not to say that such fields did not engage with questions of radicalisation in the past (Davies, 2008), but to highlight the growth in contributions from these areas.

(Lander, 2016). Whilst I share some of the concerns raised, this research has not moved the debate forward, although these authors can rightfully claim this is not their responsibility.

It is therefore promising that during this same period, academics have increasingly published empirically-informed studies on Prevent that, whilst remaining critically-removed from the policy, seemingly occupy more of an objective middle ground in this debate (Busher et al., 2017; Lundie, 2017; Innes, Roberts and Lowe, 2017; Weeks, 2018), and that specifically investigate how Prevent operates in practice. It is these studies that have the greatest potential of moving the debate on, and improving Prevent, with policy actors publicly pointing to the 'vital work' of such academics being, 'side-lined by some media outlets' (Baldet, 2017). Of course, few officials claim that Prevent is perfect, and seem receptive to valid critique (Ahmed, 2017). However, whilst these claims may be sincere, the earlier discussion of frames highlights that interpretations of such studies may be inherently biased from the outset. As such, there is a question over whether practitioners possess the reflexivity to listen, and adapt to criticism. To this end, the paper now turns to the interview data. It first outlines the dominant framing of Prevent, before turning to an analysis of frame reflection and the potential for frame synthesis.

Interview Analysis: Framing Prevent

Naming a policy issue is a core feature of framing (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016: 96). As such the contested terms of 'extremism' or 'radicalisation' are names given to specific problems within Prevent. However, where a policy controversy is organised around uncertain issues such as these, policy actors may adopt more understandable concepts from other contexts, often in the form of single words, to 'make what is going on clearer' (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016: 99-100). Official Prevent guidance has done just this by adopting the language of 'safeguarding' to identify radicalisation as a specific vulnerability (DfE, 2015: 5; Home Office, 2011: 83-4).[13] In this same way, interviewees 'named' Prevent as safeguarding, which

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[13] Indeed, the 2018 strategy aims to, 'Re-enforce safeguarding at the heart of Prevent' (Home Office, 2018a: 33).

James Lewis: Prevent as an Intractable Policy Controversy: Implications and Solutions

in turn enabled them to tell a particular story around the strategy, and to 'sell' the Duty to educators (Participant 12).

Every participant drew on the language of safeguarding to argue that radicalisation was no different to other issues such as female genital mutilation (FGM) or child sexual exploitation (CSE). Whilst concepts such as 'terrorism', 'radicalisation' and 'extremism' were discussed in the interviews, the emphasis placed on safeguarding suggested that participants chose not to frame Prevent as a distinct counter-terrorism policy and, as such, implicitly distanced Prevent from harder security strategies, in line with Rein and Schön's argument that, 'Whatever is said of a thing, denies something else of it' (Rein and Schön, 1977: 239):

'It's treated under safeguarding, and we don't want the staff to treat it any differently'

(Participant 10)

'The message from it has always been, 'It's just safeguarding, it's a continuation of your normal safeguarding duties''

(Participant 4)

Thus, whilst participants 'do not shy away from' discussing Prevent as a counter-terrorism strategy (Participant 4), there was a clear effort to frame the delivery of Prevent in less controversial language, with Participant 4, for example, seeing Prevent to sit within the promotion of the Equality Act 2010 (HM Government, 2010). The invocation of these principles of equality and human rights was seen by participants from one local authority as crucial in their attempts to 'socialise the Prevent message' (Participant 6), and that without such a basis in universal principles, 'It would be hard to put [Prevent] on the agenda, without it looking like a personal agenda' (Participant 8). In turn, one of these participants spoke of previously challenging criticism of Prevent through this same language of human rights:

'And we'd bring it back to safeguarding. And so, nobody wants their kids blown up... Equally, nobody wants their young children, their young people from their

communities, disengaged, disenfranchised, with mental health problems, feeling isolated, not feeling rooted in their communities or their families …'

(Participant 6)

Local Prevent officials therefore seemed adept at reframing what many would perceive as a counter-terrorism strategy in softer terms, thereby rooting their own stories about Prevent in terms of safeguarding. This was a highly normative framing of an issue around what Scholten has termed 'core values' (Scholten, 2011: 38), in this case protecting children from radicalisation, which one participant argued is 'a moral obligation' for teachers (Participant 9). This is a powerful message, with one participant arguing that schools should not reject the Prevent Duty because, 'You can't pick and choose which social harms you tackle' (Participant 11). In this way, this participant offered a normative judgement on schools that had previously been opposed to Prevent:

'[Y]ou could literally be in one city, and if your kid went to that school, and someone tried to exploit them online, from ISIS, they were safe. But that school in the next catchment area, no they're not. That can't be right'

(Participant 11)

On a more functional level, this framing facilitated a comparison between Prevent and broader safeguarding processes, particularly in discussions around Channel referrals. For example, Participant 9 was clear, 'I wouldn't criticise anybody for making a referral because if they've got safeguarding in mind, then everybody should feel free to report'. In this way, discussions of Channel referrals were viewed as a misnomer when compared to safeguarding more broadly:

'Over 600,000 children get referred for safeguarding every year, across the board, and in over half of those cases there's no further action, which you would expect, you know, personally I'd rather be safe than sorry as far as any safeguarding is concerned.

So why is Prevent getting a disproportionate amount of attention compared to other safeguarding issues?'

(Participant 9)

This naming of Prevent therefore enabled participants to deflect criticism about rising referral figures (Singh, 2016). Moreover, by reducing Prevent to the language of safeguarding, increasing referrals came to be viewed as potentially positive, given that even when a referral does not meet the threshold for a Channel intervention, it may well be the case that 'more work needs be done' around other vulnerabilities (Participant 4). Thus, whilst risk-aversion has been criticised for 'eroding trust' in schools (Singh, 2016), participants often disagreed:

'[Y]ou're damned if you do, damned if you don't. If you have a load of Prevent referrals, that's a disgrace, there are so many children getting reported to Prevent, x number of children under 10. This is a disgrace, you know? But you could look at that and think, that's thousands of children who are definitely not going to go to Syria, thousands of children who are being protected, I'll take that. I'd personally take that'

(Participant 9)

This message appeared to be more than a 'rhetorical frame' through which to persuade educators (Schön and Rein, 1994: 32). Particularly illustrative were the stories (or anecdotes) that participants shared, which narrative researchers see as a mechanism for uncovering tacit beliefs (Webster and Mertova, 2008: 9) and meanings that individuals place on past experiences (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007: 66). In several interviews, participants spoke to specific cases (in varying levels of detail) in which Channel had successfully supported young people who had previously become involved with either Far-Right or Islamist extremism. Yet, two participants also drew on Prevent concerns that proved unfounded. Participant 10 spoke of an incident in which a college employee raised a concern about words they believed they had overheard during a discussion between a group of Asian students. The participant had responded by interviewing the students involved, and found the discussion to be innocent.

When asked if this had been a positive result of the Duty, this participant believed it 'absolutely' had been, noting how the students understood why they had been interviewed.

A similar incident, where a school raised concerns that proved unfounded about an individual following the school's Twitter account whose posts were entirely in Arabic, was noted by another participant, who offered this argument in support of the actions taken by the school:

> '[Y]ou can criticise the school for making an inappropriate referral… but what was the outcome of that? The outcome is that they've come away with a bit more education and a bit more understanding about something that they were maybe a little bit unaware of previously, and it's helped contribute to a more positive school environment'

> (Participant 9)

The fact that both participants chose to use incidents that they both accepted could be criticised suggests a confident belief in the safeguarding message. Indeed, in defending the school, Participant 9 compared this incident with other forms of safeguarding, by arguing 'You don't teach people not to refer if they're concerned in a sexual abuse case'. In a similar way, other participants used cases of other safeguarding discussions to draw an equivalency with Prevent.

Participant 11 spoke to a case where an educator had referred a potential concern about child sexual exploitation onto a Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) in their school, based on a pupil telling them, 'that she and her Stepdad have got a special secret in the bedroom'. This led to some 'uncomfortable conversations between the school and the parents', but was found to be innocent. This participant invoked the same principle of risk aversion, noting how the parents 'came to the realisation that, thank God that their girl goes to a school where that sort of thing would be identified'. In recounting their own interpretations of specific events, the participants thus often appeared to reveal a tacit belief in the equivalency with safeguarding:

James Lewis: Prevent as an Intractable Policy Controversy: Implications and Solutions

'I don't think…even the worst sceptics of Prevent, would argue against the fundamental principles, it's more the how that's the discussion, not the actual principle of keeping people safe or stopping them becoming that extreme they want to hurt people'

(Participant 5).

The need to safeguard people thus underwrote participants' support for Prevent, and their frustration at the constant criticism from the 'worst sceptics of Prevent'. However, whilst dismissive of those wanting to end Prevent, a clear distinction was often made with genuine, informed critique, between 'those that might have a general anxiety, and those that are an anti-Prevent lobby, like vehemently anti-Prevent' (Participant 11). In this way, there was an apparent willingness to communicate with opposing voices, which, according to Schön and Rein (Schön and Rein,1994: 182), is fundamental to frame reflection. Most notably, Participant 9 welcomed the prospect of independent evaluation by proclaiming, 'Bring it on':

'I'm not saying it because we want academia to back us up, and show that we were right. But you need to show us where we're going wrong as well. So, we can then tweak it, develop it. I don't think Prevent should ever sit, I don't think it should stay static'

(Participant 9)

Participants thus appeared open to empirical critiques, a point perhaps demonstrated by the willingness of so many officials to be interviewed. Indeed, they often spoke of a 'disconnect' between 'national rhetoric and what happens on the ground' (Participant 5), arguing that opposition to Prevent would reduce as critics developed a greater understanding of the strategy:

'We take a Prevent critic to see our projects, what they're doing on the ground, who they're working with, the lives they've turned around. It doesn't matter if they're an

> MP, or a member of the community, they come away from that and think, 'Bloody hell, that's amazing, I didn't know you did that''

(Participant 11)

Whilst this willingness to communicate is promising, this 'communicative imperative' (Schön and Rein, 1994: 182) is insufficient for bridging the gap between critics and supporters of Prevent. Evidence of reflexivity will be crucial, and it is to this discussion that I now turn. In doing so, I do not argue that practitioners are the sole cause of the current stalemate, but instead investigate whether reflexivity is possible, even when holding an entrenched position.

Interview Analysis: Reflecting on Prevent

The discussion above highlights that those participants interviewed share a staunch belief that their work is crucial to safeguarding their local communities. However, in this section I discuss a potential tension at the heart of the safeguarding message, one that has been noted by other commentators. In turn, I argue that further reflection-in-action will be required if this tension is to be overcome, and that, promisingly, some of the participants demonstrated the ability to critically reflect on, and in turn reshape, how they work with communities in their local area.

Prevent work is clearly underpinned by the assumption that Prevent is a form of safeguarding. However, through Schön and Rein's framework we can see that this is a way of framing a problem, rather than an objective fact. Commentators in policy controversies 'are not always cognizant that problem definitions are not given, but 'framed,' let alone aware of how such framing takes place' (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016: 105). In this way, the unquestioning assumption that Prevent is safeguarding, and that radicalisation is comparable to other social harms, potentially suggests a lack of awareness (or at least acceptance) of the inherently constructed, and contested nature of this particular interpretation of the Prevent Duty.

Whilst research has found that practitioners are comfortable with the idea that Prevent is a form of safeguarding (Busher et al., 2017: 23), this does not mean that this equivalency can be viewed as an indisputable truth, with some authors going so far as to argue that this terminology has been 'inflated' to legitimise the Prevent Duty in education settings (Dudenhoefer, 2018: 172). Instead, reflection rests on recognising one's own frame, and the frames that others possess (Schön and Rein, 1994: 174), through which this has been challenged on the basis that Prevent may undermine the rights of the child in the name of protecting society, as opposed to the core function of safeguarding which is to protect the child from harm (Singh, 2016: 45-7; JCHR, 2016: 5). However, the unerring assertion that Prevent is safeguarding belies an overconfidence in the assumed validity of this position. That is not to say that it is definitively flawed, but to point to the importance of constantly interrogating one's own assumptions.

Schön and Rein's work speaks of a need to recognise the potential inconsistencies within one's own position (Schön and Rein, 1994: 174). Nowhere does this seem more important than within disputes over the supposed stigmatisation of Muslim communities. None of the participants argued that Prevent was perfect, with several admitting that mistakes in Prevent delivery, most notably the previous approach to allocating funding, has left a 'legacy' that still rankles with Muslim communities (Participant 5). However, there was much less nuance when criticism over the stigmatisation of Muslim communities was discussed, and ultimately dismissed:

> 'The criticism is that it targets Muslim communities. Well, you show me how I've targeted Muslim communities. I'll tell you everything I've done, all the great work I've done, all the training I've done, all the contacts I've made, you tell me how I've targeted them'

(Participant 5)

This is a justifiable statement, as I do not believe the participants I interviewed are prejudiced, or are actively targeting Muslim communities. However, participants were often candid that a

high proportion of their resources had been directed here. Indeed, one participant argued the long discussion of a disproportionate focus on Muslim communities was a 'moot question' given the 'uncomfortable truth' that Al Qaeda and ISIS disproportionately recruit Muslims:

'We can't get away from that. But what it does mean, if our limited resources and time have to be spent focusing where ISIS and Al Qaeda – we're talking early Prevent here – are targeting their activities, that means we would be doing the public a disservice, if I spent all of my time looking at Basque Separatists, or remnants of the IRA. So that doesn't mean we don't be sensitive about how we do our work, but we do need to be honest about how we do our work'

(Participant 11)

This participant was clear that resource allocation had greatly improved since the days of 'early Prevent', which was now delivered locally through, 'outreach in areas where we know the risks are higher, based on our local risk assessment'. Local Channel figures were a key source of information for this assessment. Whilst it is unclear how these figures relate to this participant's local area, the most recent figures show that in 2016/17 there were 968 referrals made to Channel for far-right concerns nationally, an increase on the previous year (Home Office, 2018b). Challenging far-right extremism is thus a core area of Prevent work:

'When you are training schools, the one thing that is absolutely imperative is that the message is delivered right, it's appropriate, you talk in equal measure about far-right extremism, because it's the opposite side of that particular coin, not in a way that pays lip service to it, but understands whilst the risks are lower at the moment, in terms of active terrorism, it's an evolving and emerging threat'

(Participant 11)

The threat from the far-right was discussed in every interview, which suggests that none of the participants were simply paying 'lip-service' to it, or singling out Muslim communities. However, the strength of rebuttal against accusations of Islamophobia, whilst understandable, may limit the ability to critically reflect on the possibility that Prevent may operate (or legitimately be perceived to operate) in this way in some cases – whether through poor design or poor delivery. Indeed, how one interprets facts such as Channel figures will be influenced by one's frame, given those same figures show that over the same period, there were 3,704 referrals made for Islamist-related concerns. Whilst supporters might explain that in terms of the relative risk from both forms of extremism, critics will continue to cite this as evidence that Prevent disproportionately targets Muslim communities (Qureshi, 2017).

Furthermore, such figures point to a tension at the heart of the safeguarding message given that other safeguarding issues are not predominantly associated with specific groups. Thus, whilst most participants saw no difference between Prevent and other safeguarding issues when directly asked, when one participant reflected on this supposed equivalency in more detail, this frame seemed to break down, as a fissure was identified which seemingly undermined this dominant message:

> 'I think there's something different about Prevent. It's so value-loaded, isn't it? It's so, kind of, if you're talking about sexual exploitation, that's everyone, isn't it? Or if you're talking about mental health, that's everyone. If you're talking about terrorism, you're talking particularly about Muslims, at the moment… if all the terrorist attacks that have come to our attention in the last year, have been Islamist-inspired, or Al Qaeda-inspired, or Daesh-inspired. Then, you know, you've got to have the focus there. Let's not pretend we're not focusing on what that ideology might, how that might impact on our families'

(Participant 6)

Thus, whilst it was clear that none of the participants in this study were solely focusing on Muslim communities,[14] the dominant framing of Prevent suffers from a potential inconsistency around this question of proportionality. Indeed, those two anecdotes discussed above, whilst offered as examples of Prevent working well by the participants, could very easily be interpreted as examples of communities being stigmatised by others. However, as argued above by Toros, the identification of such inconsistencies (or fissures) can potentially enable positive change, if practitioners are willing to work to address them (Schön and Rein, 1994: 37). That does not necessarily mean that practitioners must change their approach, but rather, recognise why particular messages around Prevent are unlikely to gain traction with those who may feel stigmatised.

In every interview, there was some recognition of the different arguments made against Prevent, which were often dismissed in similar terms to the passionate argument expressed by Participant 5 above. However, particularly interesting were two participants' discussion of concerns around colonialism and state Islamophobia. Firstly, Participant 11, spoke of critiques of Britain's 'colonial mentality', but was quite candid that they couldn't address this conclusively as, 'I don't experience it, because I'm not a person of colour'.

This speaks to the frames that commentators bring to this debate, as, whilst sensitive to these concerns, this participant viewed such arguments as irrelevant to their work. Thus, whilst some judge Prevent on ideological grounds, this participant, and all of those interviewed, framed their work solely on a desire to safeguard people – indeed their passion and commitment to protecting their communities was evident. These are two opposing frames that evaluate Prevent in different ways, with Participant 9 noting that, '[P]art of me often thinks, that by just doing what we're doing, the rest is just noise, in a sense'. It is this ideological position that often appears to separate such critics from practitioners. However, this is not universally true, with three participants from one local authority not only acknowledging, but seemingly *sharing* some of the concerns raised by critics.

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[14] Indeed, Participant 6 immediately followed the above point by referencing the very real threat from the 'creeping narrative from the extreme right-wing'. They also spoke to the Channel statistics around right-wing referrals referenced above, so they certainly did not argue that Islamist extremism was their sole focus.

Throughout this interview, the participants demonstrated an ability to 'identify alternative frames and try to understand how actors within such frames make sense of problem situations' (Scholten, 2011: 57), that is, to put themselves in the shoes of others – to recognise how certain incidents could be perceived by those who may feel stigmatised. For example, Participant 6 discussed the negative impacts of Ofsted's decision to ask children about wearing the Hijab (Adams, 2017), arguing that Muslims 'who are already feeling highly scrutinised, very angry, very vulnerable' may, 'use this as another example of the Government's war on Islam'.[15] Whilst this incident is not directly related to Prevent, such empathy in turn seemed to inform delivery of the strategy, which appeared to be rooted in an emancipatory ideal that placed the agency of the individual student at the heart of their work, and that used 'children's rights as the mechanism for engaging everyone' (Participant 6):

'Because you know that adolescent brain, the tribe seeking behaviour, the fight, the rage against the machine, the age-appropriate anarchy, all of that stuff that's going on, and it's about capturing that being a young person, which is amazing, the energy that young people have, they're agents of social change. So how do we capture that agency and provide spaces where they can make positive change?'

(Participant 6)

'For us it's always the children first, I mean, for me especially. But it's being a teacher, or a parent, but, as a, that human value in the children. Their voice is so powerful. And it's about protecting them, making sure they know their rights, and understanding how they can voice those rights as well.'

(Participant 7)

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[15] Importantly, they did not claim to agree with the notion that there is a 'war against Islam', but instead pointed to how that incident could be perceived by those who already feel under scrutiny.

This interview uncovered more criticality than might have been expected.[16] Indeed, whilst it is hard to say conclusively, perhaps the question posed above about capturing agency is indicative of reflection-in-action, the recognition of the need for a proactive response to the demands of government that balances social agency. These participants did not appear to be serving state elites, but instead were very clear that the rights of children were their primary concern. A similar observation can be made of many of the other participants, who whilst being less critical, spoke in similar language when talking of delivery:

> 'It's giving students agency as well, I think that's really important, it's sort of saying to kids, 'You can justifiably be angry at things you've seen. You can be angry with British foreign policy. Well, ok what can you do to make change? You're not old enough to vote, how can you have your voice? What is peaceful protest? How can you have your say? What is writing a letter to your MP? How does that make a difference?' All of that stuff, that for me is good Prevent work'
>
> (Participant 4)

The interviews therefore highlighted that those individuals working with local authorities shared many of the same goals as their critics, which suggests there may be some potential for coalescence. In truth, much like Participant 11 argued, it is difficult to speak empirically to claims that British policy is rooted in a colonial mentality, as the framework used within this analysis highlights that such views are no less 'true', than any other frames within this debate. However, where a specific policy is perceived to be merely serving dominant interests, the focus of analysis tends to focus on these larger forces, with Prevent merely seen as a 'ventriloquist's puppet' (Clarke et al., 2015: 34) for wider, potentially nefarious, agendas. Yet, even if Prevent is rooted in a specific ideology – which is at best unclear – this does not prohibit those on-the-ground from seeking to challenge many of the issues that critical

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[16] This is not to say that they disagreed with Prevent, as they often defended it against unjust criticism, but that they appeared more willing to recognise some of the potential challenges made against it.

James Lewis: Prevent as an Intractable Policy Controversy: Implications and Solutions

theorists concern themselves with, with several participants speaking of the need to tackle subconscious bias:

> '[Y]ou also need to take into account unconscious bias which is absolutely critical to the training. Because if you go in to a rural school, and you start talking about terrorism, they're just going to go, 'Well Muslims then basically, which is what I've thought all along, because I read *The Express*''

(Participant 11)[17]

In this way, critics may share many of the same normative commitments as those who work to deliver Prevent. Of course, there remains a fundamental disagreement over whether Prevent is the best vehicle for meeting these commitments. However, these values may form a basis on which to foster meaningful dialogue. This is not without its challenges, as there will remain some barriers to reflexivity amongst those on either side of the debate. However, within the most ideologically divisive policy controversies such as gun control, empirical research has pointed to convergence in value positions, even where there are fundamental disagreements over policy (Morral, Schell and Tankard, 2018: xiii). It therefore seems likely that empirical research could be vital in identifying common-ground within the Prevent debate on which to build a meaningful dialogue, in a way that need not undermine strongly-held moral convictions.

Conclusion

This paper has utilised the work of Donald Schön and Martin Rein to position Prevent within an 'intractable policy controversy' around counter-radicalisation. In doing so it has argued that, whilst the entrenched nature of the current debate will be difficult to overcome, there may be scope for critics and supporters of Prevent to take tentative steps towards coalescence,

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[17] This observation was based on the participant's own experience of delivering training in some schools.

James Lewis: Prevent as an Intractable Policy Controversy: Implications and Solutions

provided both sides are able to demonstrate empathy towards each other. The risk that counter-terrorism may infringe on human rights remains an ever-present danger (JCHR, 2016). However, it may be possible to deliver Prevent in a way that supports such rights. Despite the contestation around notions of safeguarding, human rights could be a theme that brings critics and policy-makers together rather than being a stick with which to beat Prevent, particularly considering the exploration of rights-based approaches to countering extremism through education (Davies, 2008; Panjwani et al., 2018). Whilst ethical concerns may be used to justify the eschewal of policy-relevance, the fact that similar ideological concerns can be shared by those working within Prevent highlights that it need not preclude academic engagement with practitioners.

However, whilst there was clear openness towards evaluation amongst the participants, the staunch defiance to much of the criticism they have faced may suggest some limits to critical reflection. It is human nature to exhibit such defiance in the face of questions about one's character. In this way, just as the critics of Prevent 'double-down' when they are challenged, there is a risk that a perceived need to defend Prevent may limit abilities to objectively process uncomfortable criticisms even when empirically-founded. This challenge will be difficult to overcome. However, in this paper I have argued that empirical investigation that moves away from treating Prevent as the 'ventriloquist's puppet' for dominant interests, could be impactful – that is, research that is open to uncovering both negative *and* positive impacts of Prevent.

Perhaps most crucially, whilst those participants interviewed as part of this research shared a common goal, the analysis presented above highlighted that they possessed distinct personalities, and positions towards Prevent, which in turn influenced how they delivered the strategy. As such, whilst underpinning many analyses of Prevent is the assumption that delivery agents are somewhat uniform, even those criticising Prevent on ideological grounds may find common ground with officials on which to build a meaningful dialogue through empiricism.

Given the relatively small size of this study, the findings possess clear limitations, as it remains unclear how ubiquitous the participants' apparent appetite for empirical research is amongst Prevent officials more generally. As such, further research will be required to understand whether there is real potential for fostering meaningful engagement between critics and supporters of Prevent in this way. However, this paper has argued that whilst fostering such dialogue will be difficult, it could well be important for positively shaping the strategy in future.

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