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Ideological Transmission in Extremist Contexts: Towards a Framework of How Ideas Are Shared

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ABSTRACT

Despite their centrality in academic and policy debates about radicalization and political violence, ideologies have been conceived narrowly, as cognitive, top-down, coherent and systematic. In general, those who have used the concept of ideology have failed to draw on ideological theory or on recent insights about its practice and embodiment, or location in space and time. Our interest is less in the content of ideology than in how it is shared by those for whom it matters. We offer an interpretive framework, based on six key questions about ideological transmission: What ideas, beliefs, and values are shared, how and why, by whom, and in which spatial and temporary contexts? Following a discussion about the methodological pros and cons of the framework, it is tested on a series of interviews with members of Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese religious group responsible for the Tokyo subway attack in 1995. We assess the strengths and limitations of the framework for analysing the various dimensions of ideological transmission before considering what it adds to our understanding of the relationship between extreme beliefs and violent behaviour.

In research on extremism, political violence and terrorism, ideology have generally been treated narrowly and uncritically, with little if any reference to the work of scholars who have defined and studied the concept and its application. Ideologies have generally been assumed to be coherent systems of ideas, and 'ideology' has been used as a synonym for political or religious doctrine or knowledge, with little recognition of what it means to people or how it is lived or shared. In some cases, ideology has been dismissed as irrelevant to issues of extremist motivation and violent attacks, and as no more than as a retrospective justification for action. Yet, despite such responses, ideology continues to be seen as central to debates about radicalization and counter-extremism.

In this article, we summarize key arguments on the role of ideology in such debates, and critique current working assumptions by engaging directly with the work of scholars who have made ideology the focus of their theoretical and empirical research. We challenge

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narrow conceptions which focus solely on cognition or on ideologies as coherent world-views, proceeding instead from the idea, articulated by Teun Van Dijk, that ‘ideologies form the shared sociocognitive foundations of social groups and their social practices’.¹ Specifically, we draw on Michael Freeden’s understanding of ideology as ‘thought-practices’, thereby foregrounding the social, material and embodied expression of ideas, beliefs and values over and above their content.² Given that a key concern of those working on radicalization and political violence is the process by which people are attracted and drawn into extreme beliefs and the social settings in which they are shared, expressed and lived out, our principal focus is not ideology *per se* but its transmission.³ We advance an interpretive framework for analysing how ideologies are communicated and applied by those with radical commitments or violent intentions. Although we do not expect to resolve the problematic relationship between extreme views and violent behaviour that is at the heart of debates about radicalization, we suggest that our framework goes some way towards bridging the gap between belief and action by connecting *what* is transmitted (the content of ideology) with *how* and *why* it is shared and practised, *by whom* and *in what* contexts (the practice of ideology). In order to test the framework, we apply it to interviews with members of Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese new religious movement that attacked the Tokyo subway with Sarin gas in 1995.

The place of ideology in research on extremism and political violence

Discussion about the concept and process of radicalization—the adoption of extreme ideas and beliefs leading to violent behaviour—has to a significant degree rotated around the part played by ideology. In the mid-1990s, Donatella Della Porta wrote that conversion to violence ‘requires a specific redefinition of reality, which the individual arrives at by adopting new beliefs and values. A value system therefore evolves within dense social networks and creates positive attitudes towards more radical forms of action’.⁴ Despite this thoughtful early articulation of the relationship between beliefs and values (ideology), social context and the move to violence, the issue became increasingly contested. In ‘The Trouble with Radicalization’, Peter Neumann noted that, in the debate about how people become extremists, neither political ideas nor the methods by which they might

¹Teun A. van Dijk, ‘Ideology and Discourse’, in Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent and Marc Stears (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 175–196: p. 194. Although we do not focus specifically on discourse nor do we adopt a critical discourse analytical approach, as will become clear later we draw on van Dijk’s understanding that ideologies ‘are organized by schemas consisting of fundamental categories for the existence and reproduction of social groups’ (p. 194). Our conception of ideology and its analysis is situated in that family of approaches identified by Leader Maynard as ‘discursive’, those which focus on ‘the communicative practices through which ideology is constituted, transmitted and made visible’ (Jonathan Leader Maynard, ‘A Map of the Field of Ideological Analysis’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 18:3 (2013), pp. 299–327: p. 304).

²Michael Freeden, ‘Practising Ideology and Ideological Practices’, *Political Studies*, 48 (2000), pp. 302–322: p. 304.

³Ben Lee and Kim Knott, *Ideological Transmission I: The Family*, Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (2016), <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/family-ideological-transmission/> (accessed July 19, 2019); Ben Lee and Kim Knott, *Ideological Transmission II: Peers, Education and Prisons*, Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (2017), <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/peers-education-prisons/> (accessed July 19, 2019); Ben Lee and Kim Knott, *Ideological Transmission III: Political and Religious Organisations*, Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (2018), <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/political-religious-organisations/> (accessed July 19, 2019).

⁴Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 136.

be realized in violence could be ignored.⁵ But academic commentators and policy makers, he said, had nevertheless favoured one or the other—extreme beliefs or violent action—without bringing the two together in a serious assessment of ‘cognitive radicalization’: both Randy Borum and John Horgan, for example, had suggested that terrorism and political violence could be studied without reference to ideology.⁶ Although Neumann argued for beliefs and political ideas to be seen as a key part of the explanatory mix, questions about ideology and its role, and the relationship between extremist beliefs and violent action have continued to be contested.⁷

Critics of ideology have variously stated that there has been too great a focus on extremist beliefs at the expense of violent behaviour, on the assumption that such beliefs lead to terrorism or direct support for it, or on the conflation of beliefs and behaviour.⁸ A well-aided criticism about cognitive radicalization has been that it lacks explanatory power, the argument being that, whilst thousands of people may share certain radical beliefs and values, only a tiny minority go on to act violently on the basis of them.⁹

Despite these criticisms, most scholars concede that ‘ideology matters’.¹⁰ Its importance for motivations and decision-making has been made by researchers from a range of disciplines, including social psychology, political science and the study of religions.¹¹ Furthermore, as Liesbeth Van der Heide has stressed, ‘it’s not about whether we think ideology matters, it matters because those that use violence in the name of ideology tell us it matters to them’,¹² a view endorsed by Dawson and Amarasingam: the transnational jihadists they interviewed routinely stressed the importance of ‘ideology/religion and deeper existential issues in their decision to become foreign fighters’.¹³

Acknowledging that ideology may not be a reliable predictor of extremist violence, Guhl has nevertheless pressed the case for beliefs and ideas to be understood in interaction with other motivating factors ‘such as social bonds, identity, emotions, moral outrage, foreign policy, internal repression, need for belonging and status considerations’, a view

⁵Peter Neumann, ‘The Trouble with Radicalization’, *International Affairs*, 89:4 (2013), pp. 873–893: p. 875.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 879, though see later work by Horgan, e.g. Donald Holbrook and John Horgan, ‘Terrorism and Ideology: Cracking the Nut’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 13:6 (2019), pp. 2–15.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 892.

⁸Charlotte Heath-Kelly, Christopher Baker-Baell and Lee Jarvis, ‘Introduction’, in Christopher Baker-Baell, Charlotte Heath-Kelly and Lee Jarvis (eds) *Counter-Radicalization: Critical Perspectives* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015); Arun Kundnani, ‘Radicalization: The Journey of a Concept’, in Baker-Baell, Heath-Kelly and Jarvis (eds) *Counter Radicalization* (2015); Anthony Richards, ‘From Terrorism to “Radicalization” to “Extremism”: Counterterrorism Imperative or Loss of Focus?’, *International Affairs*, 91:2 (2015), pp. 371–380.

⁹Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, ‘Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two Pyramids Model’, *American Psychologist*, 72:3 (2017), pp. 205–216; Bart Schuurman and Max Taylor, ‘Reconsidering Radicalization: Fanaticism and the Link Between Ideas and Violence’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 12:1 (2018), pp. 3–12.

¹⁰Mark Sedgwick, ‘Jihadist Ideology, Counter-Ideology and the ABC Model’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 5:3 (2012), pp. 359–372: p. 359; Liesbeth van der Heide, ‘Ideology Matters: Why We Cannot Afford to Ignore the Role of Ideology in Dealing With Terrorism’, *Penal Reform International*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.penalreform.org/blog/ideology-matters-why-we-cannot-afford-to-ignore/> (accessed July 19, 2019).

¹¹For example, John T. Jost and David M. Amodio, ‘Political Ideology as Motivated Social Cognition: Behavioral and Neuroscientific Evidence’, *Motivation and Emotion*, 36:1 (2012), pp. 55–64; Alessandro Orsini, ‘Poverty, Ideology and Terrorism: The STAM Bond’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 35:10 (2012), pp. 665–692; Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood, ‘Ideology in Civil War: Instrumental Adoption and Beyond’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 51:2 (2014), pp. 213–226; Sedgwick, ‘Jihadist Ideology’; Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, ‘Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for *Hijrah* to Syria and Iraq’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 40:3 (2017), pp. 191–210.

¹²Van der Heide, ‘Ideology Matters’.

¹³Dawson and Amarasingam, ‘Talking to Foreign Fighters’, p. 193. See also Michael Kenney, ‘A Community of True Believers: Learning as Process among “The Emigrants”’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (2017) pp. 1–20: p. 11. doi:10.1080/09546553.2017.1346506.

shared by other scholars.¹⁴ McCauley and Moskalenko, for example, incorporated beliefs and feelings ('opinion') into their 'two pyramids model', whilst Hafez and Mullins included political and religious ideologies—together with personal and collective grievances, networks and interpersonal ties, and enabling environments and support structures—in a 'radicalization puzzle' aimed at explaining how individuals move to violent extremism.¹⁵ Schuurman and Taylor, despite their initial criticisms, nevertheless saw ideology as providing three conditions for fanaticism in an alternative model for assessing who turns to violence and why: the presence of millenarian beliefs, the extent of ideological control, and the militancy of beliefs.¹⁶ And, in a further model of individual radicalization, Kruglanski et al. connected a person's goal motivation (their 'quest for personal significance') and social network with their ideology, 'that is, a belief system identifying the means to that goal'.¹⁷

These researchers saw ideology as one of an assemblage of factors in a dynamic radicalization process, some seeing it as complementary, others as facilitating the construction of extremist identity or the move to violence. However, whether favourable or not to the role of ideology, most of these scholars have limited it to the realm of cognition and belief, a perspective with which we now take issue.

What do we mean by ideology and ideological transmission?

Those well versed in ideological theory have complained that the treatment of ideology in studies of political violence and terrorism has been descriptive rather than analytical,¹⁸ too narrowly defined to be useful,¹⁹ or just plain side-lined in favour of other factors and issues.²⁰ They have sought in various ways to raise the profile and deepen the discussion of ideology. Sanín and Wood, for example, whilst acknowledging that ideology may have an instrumental purpose for some armed groups, have argued for the need to consider normative commitments and their potential impact on recruitment, motivation, identification of a cause, and operational issues.²¹ Others too have discussed the centrality of sacred beliefs and values in extremists' willingness to move to violence.²²

¹⁴Jakob Guhl, 'Why Beliefs Always Matter, But Rarely Help Us Predict Jihadist Violence: The Role of Cognitive Extremism as a Precursor for Violent Extremism', *Journal for Deradicalization*, 14 (2018), pp. 192–217: p. 217. See also Holbrook and Horgan, 'Terrorism and Ideology'.

¹⁵Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, 'Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual from Radical Opinion to Radical Action?', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26 (2014), pp. 69–85; Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, 'The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 38:11 (2015), pp. 958–975.

¹⁶Schuurman and Taylor, 'Reconsidering Radicalization'.

¹⁷Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Anna Sheveland, Malkanthi Hetiarachchi, Rohan Gunaratna, 'The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism', *Advances in Political Psychology*, 35, suppl. 1 (2014), pp. 69–93: p. 80 (authors' italics).

¹⁸David A. Snow and Scott C. Byrd, 'Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly Review*, 12:1 (2007), pp. 119–136: p. 121.

¹⁹Jonathan Leader Maynard, 'Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26:5 (2014), pp. 821–841: p. 824; Orsini, 'Poverty, Ideology and Terrorism'.

²⁰Sanin and Wood, 'Ideology in Civil War', p. 213.

²¹Ibid.

²²For example, R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000); Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod, 'Reframing Sacred Values', *Negotiation Journal*, 24:3 (2008), pp. 221–246; Jeremy Ginges and Scott Atran, 'What Motivates Participation in Violent Political Action: Selective Incentives or Parochial Altruism?', *Values, Fairness and Empathy Across Social Barriers*, 1167 (2009), pp. 115–123; Matthew D. Francis, 'Why the "Sacred" is a Better Resource than "Religion" for Understanding Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 28:5 (2016), pp. 912–927.

A further criticism has been that those researching conflict and violence have failed to take heed of advances in the field of ideological studies:

[A]ll is not well with efforts to theorise the role ideology plays in mass atrocities. Core concepts have typically been defined vaguely, if at all, and it is not clear that leading theorists actually share a common understanding of what ideology means, let alone how it relates to other closely implicated phenomena.²³

Criticizing the adoption of a narrow view of ideology as no more than ‘a handful of core principles or beliefs’, Jonathan Leader Maynard argued for a broader conception of ideologies as ‘elaborate and bourgeoning cultural edifices—historically sculpted networks of values, meanings, narratives, assumptions, concepts, expectations, exemplars, past experiences, images, stereotypes, and beliefs about matters of fact’.²⁴ He then identified several ‘causal pathways’ for ideology in the move to violence:

Ideology may (a) generate or shape active *motives* that create the desire to commit violence; (b) create *legitimizing* perceptions or beliefs which make violence seem permissible prior to/during commission; and/or (c) provide *rationalising* resources for retrospectively dealing with the commission or permission of violence after the fact.²⁵

Others too have criticized weak accounts of the nature and role of ideology and offered new avenues for its conceptualization.²⁶ Going further than those in terrorism studies who have incorporated ideology within a suite of contributory factors, Holbrook and Horgan have stressed that is only by understanding ‘the emergence of social collective and socially constructed sources of meaning that we begin to appreciate the more multi-faceted role that ideologies can play in processes leading toward terrorism’.²⁷ Others have challenged the tendency among researchers to set up ideologies as coherent systems only then to question their relevance when perpetrators turn out to have a shallow grasp of the fundamentals. In response, van der Heide has called for a move away from seeing ideologies as coherent worldviews towards understanding ‘what the narrative means to individuals and how it enables them to take action’.²⁸ Manni Crone too has requested that researchers give up thinking that ideology is something acquired in ‘highbrow discussions’ and turn instead to how it is embodied and enacted.²⁹

This focus on ideology as socially meaningful practice is central to our understanding of ideological transmission and its importance for studying extremist contexts and the move to violence. It has its roots in the work of two theorists of ideology, Michael Freeden and Roger Griffin. Challenging those who depicted ideologies as coherent, rational and deductive worldviews, Freeden made the case for them to be understood as ‘political thought-practices’ concerned with controlling and changing how things are done.³⁰ Ideology should be understood as ‘a communal activity taking place in social space and recurring

²³Leader Maynard, ‘Rethinking the Role’, p. 821.

²⁴Ibid., p. 824; see also Roger Griffin, ‘Ideology and Culture’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11:1 (2006), pp. 77–99: p. 81; Snow and Byrd, ‘Ideology, Framing Processes’, pp. 123.

²⁵Leader Maynard, ‘Rethinking the Role’, p. 828.

²⁶Sanin and Wood, ‘Ideology in Civil War’; Snow and Byrd, ‘Ideology, Framing Processes’; Orsini, ‘Poverty’.

²⁷Holbrook and Horgan, ‘Terrorism and Ideology’, pp. 7–8.

²⁸Van der Heide, ‘Ideology Matters’.

²⁹Manni Crone, ‘Radicalization Revisited: Violence, Politics and the Skills of the Body’, *International Affairs*, 92:3 (2016), pp. 587–604: p. 602.

³⁰Freeden, ‘Practising Ideology’, p. 304.

over time'.³¹ For Griffin, as well as providing purpose and identity, ideology played a primary role in 'social conditioning, acculturation, and the perpetuation of the past through tradition, and in the generation and implementation of revolutionary, future-oriented projects for the creation of radically new situations'.³² For both authors, the meaning-making aspect of ideology could and should not be separated from its purpose and practice, location and temporal orientation, nor from its perpetuation and transmission.

From an anthropological perspective, Crone added her voice to the call for a broadening of the understanding of ideology, suggesting that a narrow cognitive approach should be replaced by an analysis of what ideology does, how it is shared and how it is 'entwined with violence'.³³ Writing about the body and radicalization, she argued that 'a violent habitus is acquired through practice and imitation [...] the *modus operandi* of the aspiring jihadi is transmitted directly through enactment'.³⁴ This practical and embodied ideological learning is referred to by sociologists Mellor and Shilling as 'body pedagogics': 'the central institutional *means* through which a religious culture seeks to transmit its main embodied techniques, dispositions and beliefs, the *experience* typically associated with acquiring these attributes, and the embodied *outcomes* resulting from this process'.³⁵

Ideologies are practically enacted, but also produced and transmitted within social contexts, such as families, peer groups, and political and religious movements and networks.³⁶ Elsewhere we discuss the transmission of ideas, beliefs, and values through socialization, education and learning, but here we call on theories of social learning to explore a process of transmission which is participatory, practical and dynamic, but which remains subject to issues of power, hierarchy and status.³⁷ Many earlier studies of political and religious communication focused on what Jennings, Stoker and Bowers referred to as the 'standard transmission model',

[which] views parent-child similarity as an outcome of social influence and learning processes operating within the home. These processes are assumed to rest on observational learning and its variants of modelling, imitation, and identification, all of which work to heighten reproductive fidelity along political lines.³⁸

Whilst we share the interest of researchers of inter-generational transmission in *how* ideas, beliefs, and values are transmitted and the social nature of the learning

³¹Ibid.

³²Griffin, 'Ideology and Culture', p. 81.

³³Crone, 'Radicalization Revisited', p. 602.

³⁴Ibid., p. 601.

³⁵Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling, 'Body Pedagogics and the Religious Habitus: A New Direction for the Sociological Study of Religion', *Religion*, 40:1 (2010), pp. 27–38: p. 30 (authors' italics).

³⁶Snow and Byrd, 'Ideology, Framing Processes'; Lee and Knott, *Ideological Transmission I, II, III*.

³⁷Lee and Knott, *Ideological Transmission I*, pp. 12–24; Lee and Knott, *Ideological Transmission II*, pp. 25–40; Lee and Knott, *Ideological Transmission III*, pp. 29–44; Arthur Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (New York: General Learning Press, 1971); Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); John Coopey, 'The Learning Organization, Power, Politics and Ideology', *Management Learning*, 2:2 (1995), pp. 193–213. Some earlier studies of terrorism drew on Bandura's social learning theory to explain how newcomers to political violence learnt through imitation and participation, with behaviours acquired as a consequence of the 'cognitive reconstrual of moral imperatives' (Martha Crenshaw, 'How Terrorists Think: What Psychology Can Contribute to Understanding Terrorism', in L. Howard (ed) *Terrorism: Roots, Impact, Responses* (New York: Praeger, 1992), pp. 71–80; Jeff Victoroff, 'The Mind of the Terrorist: A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 49:1 (2005), pp. 3–42).

³⁸M. Kent Jennings, Laura Stoker and Jake Bowers, 'Politics across Generations: Family Transmission Re-examined', *The Journal of Politics* 71:3 (2009), pp. 782–799: p. 783.

process, our principal focus is the transfer of ideological material in extremist groups and broader milieu. In such settings, transmission may be intra-generational and bi-directional as well as inter-generational; it is as likely to take place across social and geographical boundaries as within them, and online as well as offline.³⁹ Our concern is not ideological fidelity nor the effectiveness of the transmission process; indeed, we recognize that those involved may be more or less knowledgeable about particular ideas or values, and more or less likely to identify with or remain attached to them. Nevertheless, it is clear that they engage to a greater or lesser extent with ideological material, embodying and practising as well as cognitively learning the worldviews they seek to emulate and adopt.⁴⁰ They do so in the context of those ‘communities of practice’ they admire or to which they make a commitment, whether organized groups or informal networks.⁴¹

When first theorized, a model of apprenticeship was used to explain the transmission of skills that enabled newcomers to become active participants in such a community.⁴² However, some of those who have employed the notion of ‘communities of practice’ in research on extremism and political violence have questioned whether this model is sufficient for such contexts. Karsten Hundeide, for example, asked whether a ‘community of practice’ approach could be applied to movements ‘where *commitment and conversion* to a new life is more essential than the acquisition of some craft or skill’.⁴³ He identified the stages of ‘becoming a committed insider’, from contact with charismatic leaders and the adoption of identifying marks and symbols, to redefinition of the past and adoption of new values, demonization of the enemy, and the demonstration of commitment through action.⁴⁴ Commitment to an extremist cause entailed making expressive and emotional changes, and responding to increasing ideological demands, loyalties and sacrifices.⁴⁵ Michael Kenney, in his study of al-Muhajiroun as a community of practice, noted how it bound practitioners together, instilling teachings through study groups and participation in protest and activism.⁴⁶ Newcomers, Kenney said, absorbed the worldview and practice of the group from touring speakers, through companionship and self-reflection, by shadowing more experienced mentors, and by proceeding through the ranks, from novice to instructor.⁴⁷ Although elements of cultural

³⁹Michael McDevitt and Steven Chaffee, ‘From Top-Down to Trickle-Up Influence: Revisiting Assumptions About the Family in Political Socialization’, *Political Communication*, 19:3 (2002), pp. 281–301; Anders Westholm and Richard G. Niemi, ‘Political Institutions and Political Socialization: A Cross-National Study’, *Comparative Politics*, 25:1 (1992), pp. 25–41; Samuel C. Woolley, Philip N. Howard, ‘Automation, Algorithms, and Politics| Political Communication, Computational Propaganda, and Autonomous Agents—Introduction’, *International Journal of Communication*, 10:9 (2016), pp. 4882–4890.

⁴⁰Snow and Byrd, ‘Ideology, Framing Processes’; Hafez and Mullins, ‘Radicalization Puzzle’; Crone, ‘Radicalization Revisited’.

⁴¹Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*; John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, ‘Organizational Learning and Communities-of-Practice: Toward a Unified View of Working, Learning, and Innovation’, *Organization Science*, 2:1 (1999), pp. 40–57.

⁴²Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*.

⁴³Karsten Hundeide, ‘Becoming a Committed Insider’, *Culture & Psychology*, 9:2 (2003), pp. 107–127: p. 108 (author’s italics). See also John G. Horgan, Max Taylor, Mia Bloom and Charlie Winter, ‘From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40:7 (2017), pp. 645–664.

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 113–114.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 121.

⁴⁶Kenney, ‘A Community of True Believers’, p. 14, pp. 5–11; see also Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005). Al-Muhajiroun was first formed in the 1980s in Saudi Arabia by Omar Bakri Muhammad and later established in the UK in 1996 following Omar Bakri’s resignation from Hizb-ut-Tahrir. It adopted an extreme jihadist position and was at the violent end of the Salafi spectrum. The group voluntarily disbanded in 2004 to pre-empt an expected UK Government ban, and was eventually proscribed, under several different names, in 2010.

⁴⁷Ibid.

apprenticeship—such as imitating and learning the skills of more established participants—could be seen in both these cases, other elements of ideological transmission were also at work, such as the relationship of a charismatic leader and his/her followers, persuasive communication, peer bonding and learning, embodied knowledge, and what might be called ideological fine-tuning, in which newcomers, through personal reflection and emotional work, aligned and identified themselves with particular beliefs and values.⁴⁸ Ideological transfer was multi-directional, with newcomers and more established practitioners learning from and influencing one another, and with everyone an active agent in the transmission process. Both explicit, abstract knowledge and tacit, experiential knowledge were passed on, no doubt for different reasons and in different circumstances.⁴⁹

The work of Kenney and Hundeide notwithstanding, much research on extremist and terrorist transmission has focused on operational rather than ideological processes.⁵⁰ They are difficult to separate, however, as operational training and decision-making do not occur in an ideological vacuum, but are shaped by ideas, beliefs, and values.⁵¹ Some scholars have explicitly made the connection between the two, with Crone, for example, arguing that ‘religio-political ideas conveyed in extremist milieus can incite specific forms of action, point out specific targets and contribute to the justification of violent behaviour’.⁵² Normative commitments too have been seen to influence decision-making, acting as constraints not only on motivations, but on the strategies and tactics of armed groups.⁵³ Ideologies may limit behaviour as well as permit or condone it, and may be used to channel people towards certain courses of action rather than others.

In order to shed light on the role of ideology in extremism and political violence we have favoured theoretical insights that best reflect a socio-cognitive conception of ideology as thought-practice and an account of ideological transmission as social, material and embodied, as well as cognitive. We are indebted to those theorists whose work we discussed earlier for the following definition of ideological transmission: *the communication, embodiment and practice of socially produced ideas, beliefs, and values for the purposes of generating and expressing shared meanings, traditions and identities, binding communities and legitimizing individual and collective action*.⁵⁴ In the next section, drawing on this definition, we outline an interpretive framework for analysing ideological transmission in extremist contexts.

⁴⁸Ibid.; Hundeide, ‘Becoming a Committed Insider’; Lee and Knott, *Ideological Transmission III*, pp. 37–44, 47–48.

⁴⁹Michael Kenney, ‘Beyond the Internet: Mētis, Techne, and the Limitations of Online Artifacts for Islamist Terrorists’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22:2 (2010), pp. 177–197.

⁵⁰For example, Paul Gill, John Horgan, Samuel T. Hunter, Lily D. Cushman, ‘Malevolent Creativity in Terrorist Organizations’, *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 47:2 (2013), pp. 125–151; Brian A. Jackson, John C. Baker, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, John V. Parachini, Horacio R. Trujillo, *Aptitude for Destruction: Organizational Learning in Terrorist Groups and its Implications for Combating Terrorism*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005); Louise Kettle and Andrew Mumford, ‘Terrorist Learning: A New Analytical Framework’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40:7 (2017), pp. 523–538.

⁵¹Lee and Knott, *Ideological Transmission III*, pp. 39–41.

⁵²Crone ‘Radicalization Revisited’, p. 602.

⁵³Sanin and Wood, ‘Ideology in Civil War’, p. 222.

⁵⁴Van Dijk, ‘Ideology and Discourse’; Leader Maynard, ‘Rethinking the Role’; Freeden, ‘Practising Ideology’; Griffin, ‘Ideology and Culture’; Crone, ‘Radicalization Revisited’; see also Stuart Hall’s definition of ideology in Stuart Hall, ‘The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees’, In David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds) *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996 [1986]), pp. 25–46: p. 29.

An interpretive framework for analysing ideological transmission

For all that scholars have agreed that ideology matters for understanding conflict and violence, there has been no agreement on how it should be researched and few studies that have proposed methods or approaches for its analysis.⁵⁵ Even where it has been accepted as a legitimate element in a radicalization matrix, little attention has been given to its precise role and how that role might be studied. In our view, focusing on ideological transmission rather than ideology *per se*, and breaking it down into constituent dimensions, helps the move away from a narrow focus on either cognition, key texts or ideologues. Furthermore, it requires a consideration of why and how ideas, beliefs, and values are transferred, and the process of change in time and space.

What follows is an interpretive framework for analysing ideological transmission. Rather than being the result or summation of empirical research, the framework has its origins in a multidisciplinary review of the literature on the transmission of ideas, beliefs, and values.⁵⁶ Further, it builds on the ‘ideology schema’ identified by Teun van Dijk and composed of the foundational categories of identity, activities, goals, norms and values, group relations and resources.⁵⁷ As such, it has relevance and application beyond the study of extremism and political violence to other arenas of political and religious discourse and practice.

The framework (Table 1) separates the process of ideological transmission into six constituent parts: purpose, substance, practice, and social, spatial and temporal dimensions. This is achieved by asking a series of questions—in no particular order—about *why* and *how* ideas, beliefs, and values are transmitted, acquired and practised, *who* is involved in the process, *where* and *when*, and *what* it is that is being passed on. In order to address the dimensions in more depth, we break down the questions still further into subsidiary issues. The framework is intended as a methodological tool rather than a representation of the process of transmission itself. The questions should not be read as steps or stages, but as aids to the analysis of ideology and its transmission in contexts of extremism and political violence.

As the framework is theoretically rather than empirically derived, it does not have its roots in a particular type of data or research method. It is instructive, therefore, to consider the suitability of diverse data sources and the challenges they present for the application of the framework, especially in the context of extremism and political violence where opportunities for ethnographic observation and interviews may be limited.

Potential primary sources include self-accounts in autobiographies, diaries, interviews, and police and court documents, and ideological material produced by individual authors or groups, including books, ephemera, videos, podcasts, websites, objects, and symbols. As is shown in Table 2 below, by their very nature, different data sources have distinctive benefits, limitations and ethical implications, and may well be better suited to answering some questions than others. For example, when using autobiographical and interview

⁵⁵Notable exceptions have included Leader Maynard, ‘Rethinking the Role’; Kruglanski et al., ‘The Psychology of Radicalization’; Holbrook and Horgan, ‘Ideology and Terrorism’; Donald Holbrook, ‘Designing and Applying an “Extremist Media Index”’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9:5 (2015), pp. 57–68. See also Kettle and Mumford, ‘Terrorist Learning’, on an approach to operational learning.

⁵⁶Lee and Knott, *Ideological Transmission I, II, III*.

⁵⁷Teun A. van Dijk, *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (London: Sage, 1998): p. 314; van Dijk, ‘Ideology and Discourse’, p. 179.

Table 1. Ideological transmission: an interpretive framework.

Question	Dimension	Issues to consider
Why? Reasons and motivations for ideological transmission	Purposive	Individual formation; life-long learning; recruitment; group cohesion; intergenerational transmission? Theological and/or political authorisation? Informing outsiders (propaganda)? Rationale for action?
What is transmitted?	Substantive	An ideology, theology or worldview? Political, religious, both? A set of teachings and/or practices? What type of material is transmitted (sermons, ethos, curriculum, sacred text, propaganda, symbols, artefacts, music)? What is its ideological content?
How is it transmitted? Techniques and practices	Practical	Nature of process: in/formal; explicit/tacit; auto/didactic? Mode of delivery (e.g. textual, visual, face-to-face, online)? Medium (e.g. publication, video/podcast, workshop, masterclass, forum etc)? Pedagogical approach and method? Bodily practice?
Who is involved in the transmission process?	Social	Transmitters? Receivers? Roles and relationships (e.g. teacher/pupil; charismatic leader/follower; parent/child; peer-to-peer; role model/apprentice)? Social issues (e.g. hierarchy, power, agency, autonomy, critique, discipline)?
Where does transmission take place?	Spatial	Geographical location? Context and venue (e.g. home, school/college, political party or network, religious institution, place of worship)? Open/closed spaces? Online/offline? Significant/symbolic locations?
When does it take place?	Temporal	Developmental/life stage? Regularity/frequency/duration? Significant, symbolic and/or ritual times?

Table 2. Primary data sources for an analysis of ideological transmission in extremist contexts: dimensions and limitations.

Primary sources	Key dimensions	Analytical considerations
Autobiography	Why, how, who, where, when?	Hindsight; potential ideological bias (e.g. ex-member effects, nostalgia, audience targeting)
Video/audio interviews	Why, who, when?	Hindsight; ideological bias; celebrity effects
Interview	Why, how, who, when?	Hindsight; potential interviewer bias; interviewee selectivity
Police/court documents	Who, where, when?	Hindsight; interviewer bias; interviewee selectivity
Books, tracts, sermons, manifestos, lectures, fiction	Why, what?	Relationship of ideas/beliefs to practice? Representative of wider group?
Ephemera (statements, posters, images, magazines etc)	All (depends on type of source)	Selective; partial; designed for specific purpose; representative?
Video/audio talks, sermons, short films etc	Why, what, who?	Didactic? Propagandist? Representative?
Websites; online forums	All (complexity of source)	Analytically challenging; liable to change or removal of content/site
Material culture and symbols (e.g. buildings, dress, flags, art)	Where, what, when?	Analytically challenging; cultural trend or ideological statement?

data, researchers have to be aware of the potential for authors and interviewees to be selective or biased in their recollections and explanations, given that their self-accounts are produced with the benefit of hindsight and through a subjective lens.

Secondary sources may also be useful, though the data they contain is twice-mediated, by the original researcher and then by the scholar or journalist who draws on their work. The most useful secondary materials are likely to be in-depth case studies which pull together material from multiple sources to describe, represent and frame the culture, history, relationships and/or practices of a group, network or social location. Observational material acquired covertly, for example by undercover journalists, may be informative, but may also be ethically suspect, raising questions about its reliability and framing.

In the next section, we examine ideological transmission in more depth by applying the framework and its dimensions to a particular case, a small data set of interviews with members of Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese religious group whose extreme beliefs and practices led some members to resort to violence and terrorism.⁵⁸ This involves a recursive process in which the researcher moves back and forth between the data and the framework before producing an analytical narrative and drawing conclusions.⁵⁹ In this test of the framework we use the dimensions to deconstruct the transmission process, before assessing the analytical utility and limitations of the framework. It is important to state that this is an *interpretive* framework, which necessarily displays some of the strengths and weaknesses associated with qualitative approaches involving thematic analysis (e.g. flexibility v. reliability).⁶⁰ However, the reliance in the framework on dimensions that are familiar and easy to apply suggests it to be an approach that is open to replication. The likelihood is less that researchers will disagree about applying the dimensions to the data than that the conclusions they draw—their interpretations—will differ. This leaves open the possibility of collaborative discussion, cross-checking, even disagreement, which some would argue is a weakness and others a strength.

Applying and testing the framework: the case of Aum Shinrikyo

In the case of the Japanese new religion, Aum Shinrikyo (Aum), there are multiple sources of data with the potential to contribute to an analysis of ideological transmission. Many were produced within five years of the group's terrorist attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995, although media accounts continued to appear, with the latest written to coincide with the executions in July 2018 of those convicted of preparing or carrying out this and other acts of violence.⁶¹

Self-accounts and interviews from before the attack were limited to a small number of testimonies by early members published in Aum's in-house magazine, and in media interviews with the founder. For data relevant to the motivations of those involved and events leading up to the attack, scholars are reliant on material gathered and released retrospectively. Such accounts are necessarily limited by what individuals chose to remember and how they reported it (see [Table 2](#) above). The majority of autobiographical accounts take the form of statements, letters, and interviews in Japanese, with some in English translation.⁶² Court documents, too, have contained statements by individuals made during trial proceedings.⁶³ Perhaps the most informative self-accounts have been interviews recorded since the attack with ex-members and those remaining within the two

⁵⁸These interviews were conducted by the Japanese author, Haruki Murakami, in 1998 and published as 'The Place that was Promised', *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (London: Vintage, 2013 [1998]), pp. 211–309.

⁵⁹Virginia Brown and Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3:2 (2006), pp. 77–101: pp. 86–87.

⁶⁰Brown and Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis': pp. 96–97; Lorelli S. Nowell, Jill M. Norris, Deborah E. White and Nancy J. Moules, 'Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16 (2017), pp. 1–13.

⁶¹For example, Reiji Yoshida and Sakura Murakami, 'Aum Shinrikyo Guru Shoko Asahara and Six Other Cult Members Hanged for Mass Murders', *The Japan Times*, July 6, 2018.

⁶²For example, Kanariya no Kai hen, *Oumu wo Yameta Watashitachi* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2000); Kyodo, 'Letters Written by Executed Aum Cult Members Reflect Regret, Desire to Live', *The Japan Times*, July 7, 2018.

⁶³See the thirteen-volume collection of trial documents assembled by the Japanese newspaper, *Asahi Shimbun*.

organizations formed after Aum was disbanded, Aleph and Hikari no Wa, including those published by the Japanese novelist, Haruki Murakami, to which we will turn shortly.⁶⁴

Books by the founder, Shoko Asahara (born Matsumoto Chizuo, 2 March 1955), constitute Aum's ideological canon (in Japanese, with several translated into English).⁶⁵ They were the principal means by which potential recruits came into contact with the movement and its eclectic teachings (primarily Buddhist, but including elements of Hindu and Christian thought and practice) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The transmission of Aum's ideology was by no means restricted to Asahara's published works, however. He preached and conversed regularly with members, especially in the early days when the group was small, and made various media appearances. Later recruits might also have encountered Aum's foray into manga books, or its broadcasts on Radio Aum Shinrikyo.⁶⁶ Photographic images of Asahara looking serene and charismatic in the lotus position, preaching, and being worshipped by his devotees were widely circulated at this time. Aum was keen not only to recruit newcomers but to manage its public image, something that became difficult in a media environment that became increasingly critical and hostile.

In terms of secondary source materials, in addition to academic studies, of particular note were two documentaries, entitled *A* and *A2*, made by the filmmaker Tatsuya Mori, filmed inside Aum in the years following the attack.⁶⁷ These sensitive, in-depth explorations differ markedly from the many short news items, court reports and comment pieces in the Japanese and wider global media. In general, the grey literature on Aum drew heavily on academic and journalistic sources, with a key exception being the security report written by Richard Danzig and others on how Aum members came to develop biological and chemical weapons. Despite its focus on technical and operational rather than ideological transmission, with the benefit of first-hand material from imprisoned Aum members, it showed the importance of the founder's guru status and teachings, and of members' commitment and devotion in the move to weapons development and violence.⁶⁸

In the case study that follows, we apply the framework to a single data set, the interviews conducted by Haruki Murakami in 1997–98, first published in Japanese in the magazine *Bungei Shunju*, and in English translation in 2000.⁶⁹ Despite being subject to the limitations of autobiographical interviews (see Table 2 above), this source has a number of practical and methodological advantages. It is accessible in English as well as Japanese,

⁶⁴Those who have drawn on such interview data include Ian Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000); Robert Jay Lifton, *Destroying the World to Save It* (New York: Owl Books, 2000); Richard Danzig, Marc Sageman, Terrance Leighton, Lloyd Hough, Hidemi Yuki, Rui Kotani and Zachary M. Hosford, *Aum Shinrikyo: Insights Into How Terrorists Develop Biological and Chemical Weapons* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2012). Murakami, 'The Place that was Promised'.

⁶⁵Including Shoko Asahara, *Secret Initiation* (New York: Aum USA, 1988); Shoko Asahara, *Mahayana Sutras* (Tokyo: Aum Shuppan, 1988); Shoko Asahara, *Beyond Life and Death* (New York: Aum USA, 1993). For a full list and analysis, see Susumu Shimazono, 'In the Wake of Aum: The Formation and Transformation of a Universe of Belief', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22: 3–4, (1995): pp. 383–384.

⁶⁶Japan Subculture Research Centre, 'A Short History of Aum Shinrikyo, Their Murders, and the Failure to Stop them', <http://www.japansubculture.com/a-short-history-of-aum-shinrikyo-their-murders-and-the-failure-to-stop-them/> (accessed July 19, 2019).

⁶⁷*A*, DVD, directed by Tatsuya Mori (1998; 'A' Production Committee. Tidepoint Pictures); *A2*, DVD, directed by Tatsuya Mori (2001; 'A' Production Committee. Tidepoint Pictures).

⁶⁸Danzig et al., *Aum Shinrikyo*, pp. 37–38.

⁶⁹Murakami, 'The Place that was Promised'.

having been translated by Murakami himself (who also conducted the interviews). As he noted, his aim was sensitive objectivity:

I did not undertake these interviews with present and former members of the cult in order to criticize them or denounce them, nor in the hope that people would view them in a more positive light. What I am trying to provide here is [...] flesh-and-blood material from which to construct *multiple* viewpoints.⁷⁰

In interviews of three to four hours, Murakami recorded the testimonies of eight ‘present and former members’, two women and six men, all of whom had been middle-ranking ‘renunciates’ (*shukkesha*; those who had renounced society).⁷¹ From different social and educational backgrounds, they had all made a conscious decision to leave their families, jobs and wider society to live, work and undergo religious training in the movement. They had attained different levels of responsibility and spiritual progress. According to their own testimonies, they had not carried out acts of violence nor had they any foreknowledge of the attacks.

In this analysis, we have three objectives: to apply and test the ideological transmission framework (set out in Table 1) with a single data set, in this case from a religious group that turned to violence; to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the framework and its application; and, in the Conclusion, to assess its utility for the study of extremism and the move to violence. As it is neither our concern to discuss the rise and fall of Aum more generally nor to offer a full account of the interviews, we have provided little background information, and have been selective with examples.⁷² In order to evidence our analysis, and to facilitate replication of the study, references to the data are provided in footnotes. Although Murakami names his interviewees, for brevity we have anonymized them in the text and abbreviated their names in the footnotes.⁷³ As we proceed to apply the framework, we step back from the process, not only to interpret the data, but to comment on the amount and type of material thrown up by the six dimensions.

The purposive dimension: what reasons did interviewees give for being attracted to and transmitting Aum ideology?

As we suggested in Table 2, we would expect interviews to provide data on how individuals and groups represent their motivations and purposes in seeking out and transmitting ideological material. Murakami’s interlocutors frequently commented on their reasons for becoming attracted to Aum and the founder’s teachings. Refracted in hindsight through the lens of Aum’s Buddhist philosophy, they looked back at the period prior to their involvement as a time of dissatisfaction, alienation, suffering, and impermanence.⁷⁴ They were seeking a better way, an alternative, a remedy or a convincing explanation. Most saw Aum

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 215 (author’s italics).

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²For more information on Aum and the attack, see Reader, *Religious Violence*.

⁷³Murakami, ‘The Place that was Promised’: page references to interview transcripts as follows: Hiroyuki Kano (HK), pp. 217–228; Akio Namimura (AN), pp. 229–238; Mitsuharu Inaba (MI), pp. 239–250; Hajime Masutani (HM), pp. 251–260; Miyuki Kanda (MK), pp. 261–271; Shinichi Hosoi (SH), pp. 272–284; Harumi Iwakura (HI), pp. 285–294; Hidetoshi Takahashi (HT), pp. 295–304.

⁷⁴These are key Buddhist concepts. See Reader, *Religious Violence*, and Shimazono, ‘In the Wake of Aum’.

as answering a question or need: it offered the ‘purer kind of doctrine’ one seeker was looking for; another found the dissatisfaction of his earlier quest for ‘a “remedy” to life’s problems’ answered at an Aum study centre where ‘they explained my situation to me and told me right then and there how to treat it.’⁷⁵ In the retrospective narration of their personal struggles, and the fit and timeliness of Aum’s solution, interviewees drew not only on Buddhist ideas, but on the Christian concepts of apocalypse and Armageddon.⁷⁶ As one interviewee said, this was one of the axes around which Aum Shinrikyo revolved: ‘Armageddon’s coming, so become a renunciate.’⁷⁷

Most interviewees’ answers to the *Why?* question focused on their personal quest for spiritual formation; they said little about wanting to transmit this to others. However, they did discuss Aum’s diagnosis of the suffering and fate of the world and Asahara’s compulsion to communicate this more widely, often interlacing their comments with references to Aum’s books and magazines, and to its ascetic practices. As such, they brought together subjective goals with collective theological and strategic ones. Aum’s ideological purpose was bound up both with *what* it taught and *how* this was transmitted and learned by disciples.

The substantive dimension: what ideas, beliefs, and values were transmitted within Aum and by its members?

We would expect this dimension to generate the kind of data most commonly associated with the study of ideology in extremist contexts: those political and/or theological ideas and beliefs espoused by a movement’s ideologues and close followers. As well as being found within expository books, magazines, and other sources, we might expect to find such material referred to in interviews, both with reference to the sources themselves (in this case, Asahara’s published work, audio-visual lectures etc), and to the movement’s key principles and practices. This was indeed the case. However, the first point to make is that those who joined Aum in the late-1980s and early-1990s were not blank slates in ideological terms. Most had experimented previously with other spiritual paths, had read philosophical and religious books (e.g. by Swedenborg, Nietzsche, Gurdjieff and Kafka), and tried other religions (e.g. Christian groups, esoteric Buddhism, Zen, Soka Gakkai).⁷⁸ The apocalyptic prophecies of Nostradamus—widely circulated in Japan in the 1980s, and translated by Asahara—were mentioned by most interviewees, with one affirming his ‘great influence on my generation’; this interviewee was ‘planning my life’s schedule around his prophecies.’⁷⁹ The focus on Armageddon as necessary for salvation became a common ideological reference point within Aum.⁸⁰

Intertwined with Asahara’s teachings on the apocalypse, his early writing on yoga, and meditations for renouncing the world and eliminating false views also attracted followers. Later works cited by interviewees focused more on renunciation and training as a process for achieving liberation.⁸¹ As recruits, they found Aum’s magazines and leaflets instructive

⁷⁵Murakami, ‘The Place that was Promised’, p. 231 (AN), pp. 218/222 (HK).

⁷⁶Shimazono, ‘In the Wake of Aum’.

⁷⁷Murakami, ‘The Place that was Promised’, p. 297 (HT).

⁷⁸Ibid. All interviewees.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 238 (AN).

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 238 (AN), p. 288 (HI); p. 300 (HT).

⁸¹Ibid., p. 263 (MK).

and inspiring; they were impressed by members' spiritual testimonies: 'they practised what they preached'.⁸² Introductory talks at Aum centres and TV and video footage were interviewees' first exposure to spoken testimonies and their practical embodiment and representation in dress and symbols.⁸³

Examining the ideological material transmitted by Aum through the retrospective lens of the interview brought to light those ideas and beliefs that—as new members—they had found appealing and persuasive, and identified the media through which they were channelled. Interviewees also made reference to the changing nature of what was taught: the benefits of yoga in the early days, with an apocalyptic turn from about 1990.⁸⁴ The introduction of the path of *Tantra Vajrayana* (an esoteric Buddhist path) was noted, including the concept of *poa*, in which violence was justified as an aid to personal liberation and the salvation of others.⁸⁵ One interviewee stated, however, that 'only those people who have reached an extremely high stage practise Vajrayana', and another that he 'couldn't easily swallow the doctrine of Vajrayana'.⁸⁶ In contrast, other interviewees were keen to stress Aum's statements on nonviolence, which they interpreted to mean they should avoid hitting children or killing insects.⁸⁷ Although the interviewees—all middle-ranking members—claimed not to have known about the secret development of biological and chemical weapons, they were all exposed to repeated calls for Aum to defend itself against possible external attack, as well as to the frightening effects of chemical leaks which were never justified or explained.⁸⁸

These comments by interviewees not only alert us to the importance of looking at changes over time in ideological content (perhaps best examined in a longitudinal study rather than one-off interviews), but at the processes of ideological selection and framing, at what was or was not transmitted, to whom, and how it was shaped and presented to members.

The practical dimension: how was ideology practised, and what ideological transmission techniques did Aum use?

Central to the task of reorienting ideology away from cognition and content towards behaviour and practice—following Freeden's conception of ideology as 'thought-practices'—is a focus on how ideas, beliefs, and values are enacted, embodied and lived.⁸⁹ We would expect interviews to provide some relevant data, though perhaps less than for the purposive, social and temporal dimensions, and for it to be selective and retrospective. Further, although interviewees might comment directly on 'what they did', they might not tie their actions directly to their beliefs or worldview, leaving the researcher to make such interpretive connections.

The interviews showed that, whilst Aum's ideology pervaded all aspects of life, its approach to passing on its teachings was not formalized. No official doctrine, catechism

⁸²Ibid., p. 298 (HT), see also AN, SH.

⁸³Ibid., AN, SH, MI.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 288 (HI).

⁸⁵See Reader, *Religious Violence*; Shimazono, 'In the Wake of Aum'.

⁸⁶Murakami, 'The Place that was Promised', p. 227, (HK); p. 299 (HT).

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 250 (MI), p. 269 (MK); see also Mori, A.

⁸⁸Ibid., HT, SH, MK.

⁸⁹Freeden, 'Practising Ideology'; Crone, 'Radicalization Revisited'.

or curriculum was drawn up. What was evident, however, was that teachings were not just mental constructs for those in Aum, but ideas to live by, whether these were ideas about yogic practice, renouncing family and possessions, disciplining the body or carrying out acts of violence on the self or others. *How* such ideas were practised and embodied was discussed frequently by interviewees. This ranged from comments about mundane tasks, to those on spiritual practice, asceticism, and violence.

Although none of those interviewed were formally involved in teaching the philosophy and practices to others within or beyond Aum, they became part of the transmission cycle in other ways, e.g. by preparing and distributing leaflets, drawing cartoons and animations for Aum propaganda, and teaching science to the movement's children.⁹⁰ They also undertook practical roles which contributed to the sustainability of Aum, such as cooking, cleaning, clerical work, building, welding, and management duties. Several interviewees did make the link between this work and Aum's ideas: such duties were understood to build up 'spiritual merit', or to provide a teaching opportunity.⁹¹ Others recognized that carrying out mundane tasks assigned by the guru was 'an act of devotion'.⁹²

In addition to practical service, most alluded to those spiritual activities prescribed openly in Asahara's books, such as meditation, breathing exercises, and various kinds of initiation. Some also referred to practices taught only to renunciates, such as 'secret yoga' and ascetic acts, including those of a violent nature. One interviewee, for example, observing his own failure to advance despite devotion to the guru and a period of intensive training, study and meditation, noted that from 1993 'sermons increasingly focused on Tantra Vajrayana [and] our training started to include some bizarre elements'.⁹³ In his account of this ascetic regime, he described martial arts, being hung upside down with legs tied in chains, lie detection tests, solitary confinement, drug experimentation, and a practice called 'Christ initiation'.⁹⁴ Although this interviewee began to question and challenge these practices, and eventually escaped, more generally members subordinated their will, faith and better judgement to 'an order from the top', as a mark of being chosen and a sign of their devotion, self-discipline, and spiritual advancement.⁹⁵

Whether doing physical labour or spiritual training, renunciates accepted the dictum that they must transform their bodies before changing the world.⁹⁶ Rather than focus on book learning or formal didactics, through body work they 'embodied [the] techniques, dispositions and beliefs' expounded by Asahara in the expectation that they would reap the prescribed outcomes of purification and liberation.⁹⁷ This link between thought and embodied practice was made clear when one interviewee expressed the view that, 'Apocalypse is not some set idea, but more of a process. After an apocalyptic vision, there's always a purging or purifying process that takes place.'⁹⁸ Dramatically enacted in the

⁹⁰Ibid., MK, HI, SH, HM, MI.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 243 (MI); p. 266 (MK).

⁹²Ibid., p. 254 (HM).

⁹³Ibid., pp. 254–255 (HM).

⁹⁴Ibid., pp. 255–257 (HM).

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 258 (HM); p. 301 (HT).

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 298 (HT).

⁹⁷Mellor and Shilling, 'Body Pedagogics', p. 30.

⁹⁸Murakami, 'The Place that was Promised', p. 303 (HT).

Tokyo subway attack, such a vision was also practised on the bodies of those who committed to Aum's violent worldview.⁹⁹

The social dimension: who was involved? What were their roles and relationships?

Examining the social dimension opens up the internal and external roles and relationships associated with ideological transmission (who transmits to whom) and the operation of hierarchy, power, and agency within the process. In an autobiographical interview, we might expect the interviewee to position themselves at the centre of their own narrative, and to comment on their relationships with significant others, whether family, peers or—in this case—Aum leaders and disciples. Our interest was in the web of ideological relations they wove and any routes, hubs and breaks in the transmission process.

Testimonies showed Asahara—as guru, teacher and ideologue—to be pivotal to Aum and the transmission of its ideas, beliefs, and practices. He was repeatedly alluded to as the charismatic personality who attracted them to the movement and sustained their involvement thereafter.¹⁰⁰ As early recruits, some had benefitted from his personal attention, advice and guidance in 'secret yoga'; they spoke of his power, aura, charisma and kindness.¹⁰¹ One stressed the need for a spiritual guide 'who would provide the final answer to Buddhist teachings. The one who would interpret it for me'.¹⁰² Asahara evoked devotion and obedience, convincing some of his divine power and gifts.¹⁰³ Others—perhaps with hindsight—were more cynical.¹⁰⁴ Although Asahara was undoubtedly the figurehead, others in Aum's upper echelons were also held in high esteem.¹⁰⁵ Murai Hideo, Yoshihiro Inoue and Fumihiro Joyu were referred to as speakers, decision-makers and managers capable of motivating, disciplining and exercising power over others. They played key roles in the transmission of Aum's ideology, embodying its ideas and values and enforcing its training requirements. However, even these elite members did as they were told, according to one interviewee.¹⁰⁶

There is little reference in these testimonies to peer relationships, at least until after the attacks when leaders had fled or been arrested, and remaining members had been left to their own devices. Before this, the clear message was that, despite working alongside one another, they were on personal spiritual journeys and were largely unconcerned with the progress or problems of others. There was no sense of transmission or learning between peers, except to reinforce the need for obedience, faith, and devotion.¹⁰⁷ Several tried to question the orders they received, but were met with expressions of anger, disappointment or no response at all. They were expected to accept and endure the situation for reasons of spiritual gain. After the subway attack, however, socially ostracized and with few opportunities to return to society, they came to rely on one another, sharing their doubts and

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Hundeide, 'Becoming a Committed Insider'. David C. Hofmann and Lorne L. Dawson, 'The Neglected Role of Charismatic Authority in the Study of Terrorist Groups and Radicalization', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 37:4 (2014), pp. 348–368.

¹⁰¹Ibid. MK, MI, HM.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 244 (MI).

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 253 (HM); p. 275 (SH).

¹⁰⁴Ibid., pp. 252–253 (HM); p. 290 (HI).

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 282 (SH); p. 301 (HT); p. 241 (MI).

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 282 (SH).

¹⁰⁷Ibid., HT, MH.

confusion, and benefitting from mutual support: ‘What gets me through each day is my ex-Aum friends’, said one.¹⁰⁸

Most interviewees expressed an unwillingness to accept that fellow members might have been involved in the attacks. The distance between them and those outside the movement had never felt greater, with one saying ‘there’s such a huge gap between the Aum I experienced and the picture of Aum outsiders have’.¹⁰⁹ In fact, the testimonies revealed almost nothing about the external relationships of members after their initial withdrawal from family, friends and wider society, and initiation as renunciates. Most made no attempt to keep in contact or recruit others. Furthermore, for some, this distancing process could not be reversed: ‘When I entered Aum I burned every photo album I owned. I burned my diaries. I broke up with my girlfriend. I threw everything away.’¹¹⁰ Although a few attempted to return to their families after the attack, most had no basis on which to rebuild, and no beliefs or values in common to allow connections to be made.

The spatial and temporal dimensions: where and when did transmission take place? How were space and time significant?

In addition to analysing the purposive, substantive, practical and social aspects of ideological transmission, space and time offer important lenses for several reasons.¹¹¹ In ideological testimonies they constitute important symbolic markers in the representation of this and other worlds. Actual places and times may be considered sacred, may be commemorated and memorialized. In addition, mythic and imagined futures may operate as a source of desire and motivation. Individuals often stress personal timelines or sites of importance in their narratives of ideological engagement; groups—via leaders, recruiters, teachers and the doctrinal material and propaganda they disseminate—portray eschatological, utopian and sometimes apocalyptic times and spaces as they flesh out their ideological pathways.

As we suggested earlier, autobiographical or oral history interviews might be expected to offer rich material on *why*, *how* and *by whom* ideology is transmitted (Table 2). The temporal dimension (*when*) might also be important. However, we might expect less detail than in some other data sources about ideological content (*what*) and its spatial transmission (*where*). These suppositions were broadly borne out. Relatively little information was provided in the interviews about *where* things happened, with some references to Aum centres, such as Setagaya in Tokyo and the Mt Fuji headquarters, to sites where individuals worked, and to a secret chemical production facility (Satyam No. 7). Interviewees referenced these in order to situate events and activities within their narratives rather than to describe them in and of themselves. In fact, places—whether actual or imagined—were only rendered in detail on the rare occasion that they were connected to powerful experiences. For example, in his account of enforced ascetic practice, one interviewee described the locked solitary confinement cell, ‘the size of one tatami mat’, the heat and grime, and the absence of toilet or washing facilities.¹¹² Another described Satyam No.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 248 (MI); p. 284 (SH); see also Mori, A.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 269 (MK).

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 303 (HT).

¹¹¹As Freeden noted, ideologies are communal activities which take place in space and time. Freeden, ‘Practising Ideology’, p. 304.

¹¹²Ibid., pp. 256–257 (HM).

7 as ‘a dangerous place’ where he was exposed to a chemical leak, and where he was later called on to disguise the building’s interior in case of a raid by the authorities.¹¹³

Interviewees revealed substantially more about *when* things happened, though they were rarely specific about years and dates. Although they may move backwards or forwards in time, autobiographical interviews of this kind tend to frame events chronologically. They rely on the interviewee’s subjective time-line: in the case of Aum, from early life to first point of contact, initial experiences, subsequent work and training, what the subject was doing when the subway attack was carried out, and what happened thereafter. This temporal structure formed the backdrop against which interviewees mapped out their involvement and, latterly, distanced themselves from violence and those responsible for it.

Interviewees’ understandings of the passage of time and their own place within it was ideologically-inflected. In one telling case, an interviewee revealed how an ideological shift led to his decision to cooperate with the police: ‘Aum threatened me, saying that if I talked I’d be cast into eternal damnation, but I no longer believed that.’¹¹⁴ The account of his time in custody was replete with temporal details: ‘They held me for 23 days’, with the interrogation taking place ‘three times a day and each session was really long’; it continued ‘day after day’.¹¹⁵ Intense and traumatic experiences of this kind tended to generate recollections rich in both spatial and temporal detail.

Added to this, in association with Aum’s apocalyptic ideology, the interviewees often voiced their conception of past events and the future with reference to the imminence of Armageddon.¹¹⁶ One interviewee thoughtfully discussed the place of apocalyptic thinking not only in Aum’s eschatology but in the wider national consciousness, often drawing on temporal (and spatial) tropes. Describing a general ‘sense of terror about the near future, the direction our world’s heading in’, he was explicit about the centrality of the End times for Aum followers: ‘Aum is a collection of people who have accepted the end.’¹¹⁷ Relating this to his personal quest, along with other followers, he said he had imagined a utopian society and ‘discarded the world’, though he was later required to re-engage with it following the subway attack.¹¹⁸

Focusing on the spatial and temporal dimensions of ideology and its transmission not only highlights references made to actual places and times, but requires the researcher to consider the way in which individuals engage with ideological material to support their subjective vision and interpretation of this and other worlds and the timeline for moving between them. In Aum, the developing sense that the world had turned against them and that violence was needed to realize the End and bring about the movement’s ultimate purpose was increasingly expressed within Asahara’s publications and statements.

The framework as a methodological resource for analysing ideological transmission in Aum

The framework offered a series of dimensions through which to focus and elicit information on ideology and its transmission. The analytical process was both recursive and

¹¹³Ibid., p. 280 (SH).

¹¹⁴Ibid., pp. 282–283 (SH).

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶See Footnotes 76 and 77.

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 297 (HT).

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 296; p. 303 (HT).

interpretive: in this test case, it required us to return repeatedly to the interview data with different questions in mind, and then to interpret the evidence found there to form an overall picture of transmission in Aum Shinrikyo, of what ideas, beliefs, and values members shared, how and why they did so, who was involved, and under what social, spatial and temporal conditions.

There were several challenges. Decisions about what information to include or exclude and how to code it were sometimes difficult, and to a degree subjective, although the dimensions were sufficiently straightforward and distinctive to minimize coding problems. More challenging was the nature of the research problem—ideological transmission within extremist contexts—in so far as it raised issues about how ideology, and the process and conditions in which it is shared and lived might or might not be understood as ‘extreme/extremist’ (which, as a result, might impact on data selection and interpretation). This will be discussed further in the conclusion, suffice it to say here that the framework itself is neutral on the subject. It is a general framework which can be applied irrespective of the nature of the ideological context.

Having said this, it should be stressed that the framework was developed with the intention of providing a counter-weight to approaches in which ideology had been treated solely as cognitive. Analysing the practical, social and spatial dimensions of transmission, in particular, has helped show how ideas, beliefs, and values are expressed and lived out individually and collectively, are subject to hierarchy and power relations, and have symbolic, spatial and emotional entailments. Our focus on the multi-dimensional nature of ideology in order to analyse its adoption and transmission is not intended to deny the possibility that some ideologies might cohere, nor to downplay the interconnections between the various dimensions. Although individuals may not believe in or intellectually subscribe to a coherent system of ideas or worldview, they may commit to it in order to satisfy a need to belong or to express an identity. By practising that ideology—whatever their motivations—they embody it, helping to give it credence and social force. For those in Aum, their thoughts about society and the future, and willingness to submit to tough ascetic and work regimes for personal spiritual progress mirrored the movement’s teachings. Even as Aum’s ideas and practices became more extreme and members began to have doubts, their belief in the guru and the efficacy of the training meant they remained committed (even after the attack).

Conclusion: extremism, violence and the transmission of ideology

Our aims have been to develop an interpretive framework for analysing ideological transmission and to test its application with data from an extremist context. They were set within a critical review of the literature on the role of ideology in radicalization and political violence. Drawing on the work of theorists of ideology and those who have examined its practice and embodiment, we moved away from cognitivist assumptions about ideology as a coherent worldview, and repositioned it as ‘thought-practices’, focusing less on the content of ideology than on how it is shared, expressed and lived.¹¹⁹ The resulting framework (Table 1) distinguished six dimensions—purposive, substantive, practical, social,

¹¹⁹Freeden, ‘Practising Ideology’, p. 304; Leader Maynard, ‘Rethinking the Role’; Griffin, ‘Ideology and Culture’; Crone, ‘Radicalization Revisited’.

spatial and temporal—which were designed to dissect the process of ideological transmission. In addition to testing the framework on a small data set of interviews, potential methodological benefits and limitations were discussed.

What if anything did using the framework reveal for research on extremism? The framework need not be limited to the analysis of ideological transmission in extremist contexts, but it can certainly be applied to them, as shown in the test case of Aum Shinrikyo. However, whilst the framework can help to generate relevant evidence about how, why, where and when ideological material is transmitted and by whom, it is neutral on whether or not such evidence can be labelled extremist. Which ideas, beliefs, values and associated symbols and practices are designated ‘extreme’, and under what circumstances, remains open to discussion.

In the case of Aum, many observers have viewed apocalyptic thinking, a fixation with Armageddon, a belief in the guru as the object of devotion, and increasingly negative views about the world and a desire to be liberated from it as ideologically extreme.¹²⁰ However, these features are shared by a number of radical religious and political groups, past and present. In Aum, as members practised what they preached, such beliefs had behavioural ramifications, with members cutting themselves off from outsiders and participating in disciplinary regimes tantamount to torture. Spiritual retreat, self-discipline, and devotional practice are not uncommon features of religions, but such exclusionary, intensive and violent practices are rare. It was in the practice of their ideology rather than in their ideas alone that Aum members could really be said to have courted the label ‘extreme’.

Re-envisioning ideology as thought-practices necessarily has implications for how it is understood to relate to behaviour. Although it remains important to avoid conflating beliefs and actions or assuming that one leads unproblematically to the other, the decision to move the focus from the content of ideas and beliefs to how they are transmitted and expressed is a step towards reconnecting the two. The perennial question about whether people act violently on their extreme beliefs is defused; by sharing, practising and embodying such beliefs, they have already begun the process of acting on them. Ideology is necessarily behavioural as well as cognitive.

Radicalization theorists have agreed that ‘the adoption of radical beliefs alone is not a necessary or sufficient condition for involvement in terrorism’.¹²¹ They have considered ideology to be a poor predictor of violent behaviour on the basis that thousands of people may share extreme beliefs (including those that endorse or advocate violence), but only a tiny minority go on to act violently. Whilst we do not dispute these views—and certainly make no predictive claims for the framework—it is important to challenge the narrow cognitive understanding of ideology on which they are generally premised. To side-line the role of ideology in political violence and terrorism on this basis, or indeed on the grounds that not everyone who shares violent views proceeds to act on them, would be to risk losing a powerful concept that helps explain how and why people are drawn into extremism and what leads some to prepare or carry out violent or terrorist acts.

¹²⁰For example, Reader, *Religious Violence*; Lifton, *Destroying the World*; Danzig et al., *Aum Shinrikyo*.

¹²¹Schuurman and Taylor, ‘Reconsidering Radicalization’, p. 4; McCauley and Moskalenko, ‘Understanding Political Radicalization’; Guhl, ‘Why Beliefs Always Matter’; Holbrook and Horgan, ‘Ideology and Terrorism’.

A single test case is insufficient for drawing reliable conclusions on the role of ideological thought-practices in the move to violence. Nevertheless, the application of the framework's dimensions to interviews with members of Aum did generate relevant observations on the relationship between beliefs and violent behaviour that can be tested in future studies:

- the presence in Aum of beliefs about violence and nonviolence, and some evidence of the ideological legitimization of violence
- the culture and practice of violence on the self and others, explained and justified with reference to Aum's beliefs and values
- a social context of authoritarianism, obedience, and devotion which enabled and reinforced an arduous and at times violent disciplinary regime
- an ideological and physical environment of exclusion and secrecy with limited opportunity for beliefs to be contested, for communication with the outside world or escape
- and a conviction that the end was nigh and the group was under immediate threat from outsiders that supported the decision to act violently.

Breaking ideological transmission down into its constituent dimensions helps reveal the linkage between beliefs and behaviour, the processes and people involved, and the underlying conditions. As an analytical resource, the framework has potential for use in conjunction with current theories on the role of ideology in radicalization and political violence, for example, on causal pathways, significance quest, fanaticism, and the violent habitus.¹²²

For those who commit acts of terror and violence, ideology—in the broad sense we have used it here—may indeed play a defining role in the construction of their identity and lifestyle, and in their choices and motivations, commitments and sacrifices. It is difficult to make sense of the move to violence without factoring in the beliefs and values actors deem to be important, how these are lived and shared, embodied and practised, and the extent to which they may govern decisions and actions.

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¹²²Leader Maynard, 'Rethinking the Role'; Kruglanski et al., 'The Psychology of Radicalization'; Schuurman and Taylor, 'Reconsidering Radicalisation'; Crone, 'Revisiting Radicalisation'.

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