Social capital and the enactment of prevent duty: an empirical case-study of schools and colleges

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ABSTRACT

Since the introduction of the Prevent duty, there have been serious anxieties expressed concerning its potential to be discriminatory and counter-productive in nature. Further, various erroneous referrals have illuminated how oversights can vilify innocent people, including children. Through the analysis of empirical data collected within schools, colleges and other public sector organisations across Sussex, this article explores how some tasked with the duty’s implementation enact agency when attempting to alleviate these concerns. In this regard, this article is the first to apply a social capital framework to better understand the role played by informal relationships in respect to people’s duty to identify and refer those considered to be “at risk of radicalisation” or “being drawn into terrorism”. As Prevent is not evenly distributed across the county in terms of people’s confidence, knowledge, training and depth of awareness, some respondents were accessing wider informal support and guidance when required. The findings also indicate that those who engage in these informal relationships – both internally within schools/colleges and externally with public-sector agencies – speak of higher levels of confidence and less apprehension with the duty. Further, informal relationships appeared to have the potential to affect perceptions and actualities of erroneous referrals.

KEYWORDS

Prevent duty; CVE; education; radicalisation; social capital; agency

Introduction

In 2015, mandated by the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (Parliament, UK 2015), the British Government developed the UK’s existing Prevent Strategy (HM Government 2018) by imposing a legal duty on various sectors – including education, health, and social services, amongst others – to show “due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism” (HM Government 2019). Within schools and colleges, this “Prevent duty” is considered to take a two-pronged approach (Sjøen and Jore 2019). The first, preventing violent extremism (PVE), considers the educational perspective predominantly focussed upon the OFSTED assessed engagement with and active promotion of Fundamental British Values (FBV) (Department for Education 2014). The second part – and the focus of this article – relates to the countering violent extremism (CVE) approach. Here, there is particular attention given to the identification and referral (through “Channel”1) of students considered to be “at risk of radicalisation” or of being “drawn into terrorism” (HM Government 2015; 2015a).

Since the introduction of the duty, the number of referrals has increased substantially (Heath-Kelly and Strausz 2019), with the education sector accounting for the highest levels of reporting (Home Office 2019). An important, though rarely mentioned, aspect of these statistics is the “no further action” category and “deemed not suitable for Channel” consideration. From the most recent available statistics (at the time of writing) in the year ending March 2019, “77% [of referrals]...were deemed not suitable for Channel con-sideration and exited the process prior to a Channel panel discussion” (Home Office 2019, 6). Further, of those “referrals deemed suitable through preliminary assessment to be discussed at a Channel panel...[58%] did not go on to be adopted as a Channel case” (ibid: 7). Although a relatively large number of these individuals may be “signposted to other
services” (ibid), and an acknowledgement that it is difficult to completely ascertain the situation without specific knowledge of each case, it can be hypothesised that a potentially sizeable number of the “no further action” and “deemed not suitable for Channel” categories could relate to erroneous or “inappropriate” (Heath-Kelly 2017) referrals, at least in the context of Prevent duty.

After the announcement of the duty and during its initial implementation, there were also widespread fears concerning its potential to be draconian and discriminatory in nature. The media has been replete with stories of (often young Muslim) students being referred through Channel due to some oversight in assessment (Busher, Choudhury, and Thomas 2019). These – potentially discriminatory – erroneous referrals were often due, amongst other reasons, to misinterpretations of what students intended to say or write, a conflation between increased religiosity and association with violent extremism, or a general lack of knowledge or support of those undertaking the referrals. Although these incidents appear to be rare, they have the potential to be detrimental to the short- to long-term mental health, community standing, relationships with family and friends, and current and prospective employment of those involved (Lakhani 2012).

As a result – as with its PVE counterpart (Elton-Chalcraft et al. 2017; Revell and Bryan 2016; Farrell and Lander 2019; Farrell 2016; Jerome, Elwick, and Kazim 2019) – the CVE prong is wrought with criticisms, particularly around the securitisation of education, with consistent arguments that teachers should not be burdened with the responsibility of “policing” their students (O’Donnell 2016). In addition, it is argued that the positioning of Channel as a “pre-criminal” space also causes issues with the “blurring notions of due process and culpability which have typically bounded police work” (Lundie 2019, 322). This has the potential to lead to the duty developing a “counter-productive” nature (Durodie 2016; Davies 2016), and fear of educators being drawn into a “villain-victim” imagery of their students (Sieckelinck, Kaulingfreks, and De Winter 2015). This could result in the “alienation, disaffection and disengagement” of students more generally, including curtailing their freedom of speech (O’Donnell 2016), and broader concerns over academic freedom (Taylor and Soni 2017). Further, and critically, it is argued that requiring teachers to spot signs of radicalisation is difficult, leading to potentially discriminatory aspects of the duty (House of Commons 2016). This is particularly relevant when considering that there is often little agreement about the definition and process(es) of radicalisation (Schmid 2013), including its relationship with terrorism (Horgan 2011). In addition, wider evidence “suggests that there are differences in approaches, most likely due to variations in confidence and experience among educators” (Sjøen and Jore 2019, 277).

Despite these pertinent fears, recent research has demonstrated that in schools and colleges “contrary to expectations, not only has overt professional opposition been limited [towards the duty], but there has been some evidence of positive acceptance. It is argued that these findings neither simply reflect reluctant policy accommodation nor do they simply reflect straightforward policy acceptance, but rather they comprise the outcome of multi-level processes of policy narration, enactment and adaptation.” (Busher, Choudhury, and Thomas 2019, 440) Wider investigation indicates that this curious position has much to do with those on the ground responsible for its implementation, with “evidence...[illustrating] how teachers have agency in relation to the policy, and may thus be able to enact the policy in ways which reduce some of the most harmful effects” (Jerome, Elwick, and Kazim 2019, 1). The existence and value of agency in these circumstances relates to numerous approaches regarding the duty’s implementation (Elwick and Jerome 2019), and as Elwick and Jerome (2019, 350) explain, “...teacher agency in relation to the Prevent duty is evident in the combination of a teacher’s individual capacity to act; their beliefs, prior conceptions and understandings; and their context (including factors within the school and in the local community).” One particular strategy to enact agency is through informally engaging in wider networks to seek guidance prior to deciding whether an individual is “at risk” and needs to be referred through Channel. In fact, Prevent duty guidance itself outlines that sectors need to work
effectively with relevant external partners (HM Government 2019). Internally, also, Prevent training advocates the “notice-check-share” approach, where the “check” recommends individuals to seek advice if they suspect someone is “at risk”.

Within schools and colleges, the overarching accountability for Prevent duty – which sits within wider safeguarding responsibilities (Department for Education 2019) – is with the Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) and Deputy Designated Safeguarding Leads (DDSLs). Wider research has shown that although confidence in the duty was generally high, those who were not DSLs for their institution “expressed significantly less confidence than their more senior or experienced colleagues” (Busher et al. 2017, 6). Busher et al. (2017) outline that in the institutions within their study, there generally was a culture of “if in doubt speak to someone”, which was about less-experienced teachers drawing upon the knowledge and experience of DSLs – developed through their wider safeguarding responsibilities (Busher, Choudhury, and Thomas 2019). In fact, the authors argue, albeit briefly, that feeling supported and the culture of vigilance created by DSLs in the schools and colleges within their sample led to increased levels of confidence and a mitigation of anxieties towards the duty (Busher et al. 2017; Busher, Choudhury, and Thomas 2019). Busher et al.’s (2017, 33) research also mentions the role played by external informal relationships, where DSLs were able to positively engage in informal conversations with local authority Prevent practitioners as “an extra source of help”, in order to receive advice, support, and guidance.

This article builds upon this narrative and investigates these relationships in far greater depth; a consideration within the Prevent duty agenda that is highly under-researched and underappreciated. A particularly important contemplation with these interactions is the value held in their informality, i.e. the ability to seek advice and guidance without a formal enquiry or referral. Through the analysis of empirical data collected within schools, colleges, and other local public sector organisations across Sussex (located in South East England), this article explores the value played by informal internal and external relationships in regards to the CVE aspect of the duty. This is principally in relation to the identification, referral and support of those students considered to be “at risk of radicalisation” or of “being drawn into terrorism” (HM Government 2015a, 4). With both internal and external relationships, there is a reliance upon accessing existing practices, experience, ideas, networks, norms, and knowledge exchange – holding similarities to those attributes underpinning ideas around social capital.

**A social capital theoretical framework**

Although there are often fierce debates around the appropriateness of different approaches within the study of social capital (Edwards and Foley 1998; Weller 2010; Julien 2015), there are important underlying similarities. As Weller (2010, 874) notes, “there are commonalities uniting a range of authors, not least a focus on norms, trust, values and networks.” Despite disagreements about what “capital” actually means and entails, prevalent contemporary theories of social capital can generally be described as “neo-capitalist theories” (Lin 1999), encompassing two approaches in particular. One of these aligns closely with the work of Robert Putnam (2000) and focuses upon a communitarianism approach which positions social capital as a “resource which leads to shared knowledge, beneficial civic engagement, and the acquisition of skills that are required to solve particular problems” facing a community or society more widely (Julien 2015, 358). This is thus about access to institutional and externally held prior knowledge and experience, attained through human interactions. It is about networks of people who depend on one another, who collaborate to benefit a particular society or a society within, and enable it to function as effectively and efficiently as possible.
Looking across the literature more widely, Lin’s (1999) work on social capital provides further demonstration of this and outlines a theoretical foundation to investigate how the reception and implementation of the Prevent duty can begin to mitigate some of the aforementioned risks and critiques associated with the requirement. Lin (1999, 35) defines social capital as the “resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions.” By this definition, the notion of social capital contains three ingredients: resources embedded in a social structure; accessibility to such social resources by individuals; and use or mobilization of such social resources by individuals in purposive actions. Thus, social capital not only has the potential to reveal the processes through which Prevent duty is implemented, but also the means through which this is possible. Critically, it not only enables a recognition of the importance attached to individual agency, but also the complex interplay of existing structures and those developed for the duty.

The use of social capital as a theoretical framework within the counter-terrorism agenda, particularly with Prevent, has thus far been largely overlooked. The consideration, more so an assumption, of actors within this agenda as unconnected to one another is unrealistic. As outlined in the examination of key literature above, there is an appropriateness and importance of examining the capacity of educators to utilise and generate capital within their implementation of the Prevent duty. Thus, understanding the role agency and capital plays, its effects and outcomes, is important though often neglected. This article presents an empirically grounded understanding of the role informal networks play – embedded in a social capital framework – within the CVE Prevent duty agenda in schools and colleges, using Sussex as a case-study. Sussex was chosen as it represented a continuation of existing research in this county undertaken by the lead author (Lakhani and Bernard 2017). Prior to discussing the findings, the methodological approach taken by this research is outlined.

Methodology

This article is grounded in empirical data collected for research conducted between September 2018 and June 2019, funded by the British Academy and Leverhulme Trust. In total, 39 in-depth qualitative interviews were completed. Of these, 29 were undertaken in schools and colleges – 11 with teachers and 18 with DSLs and DDSLs (16 male and 13 female interviewees). In terms of geographical breakdown, 14 were conducted in West Sussex, 10 in Brighton (East Sussex), four in other parts of East Sussex, and there was one interviewee who did not want the general location of their institution mentioned. Of the 29 interviews in education settings, four were in schools only (i.e. with no sixth-form or college attached), five were in colleges, and 20 were in schools which either had an attached sixth-form or college. A further 10 interviews were completed with Prevent officers in Sussex Police, and local and county officials working on the Prevent agenda.

In terms of ethics and risk management, there were a number of important considerations within the research design to ensure the safety and confidentiality of both participant and investigator. These were in strict compliance with relevant ethical guidelines, such as those outlined by the University of Sussex. Although the risks to researcher and respondents were not considered to be “high”, there were particular considerations around mental health due to the research including sensitive topics around (violent) extremism. Thus, although all of the respondents had considered these topics, and many had engaged with them through training and actual referrals, there was the risk of psychological distress and this was constantly reviewed throughout the research process.

The teachers were recruited using a “bottom-up” approach based upon the principles of “snowballing” (Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam 2003). The author sent emails to colleagues and wrote social media requests to contacts living in Sussex in order to be put in touch with teachers at secondary
schools and/or colleges across the county. As a result, a number of potential respondents were identified and contacted, and further respondents were snowballed through these individuals. The respondents within the “officials” category were recruited through targeted emails sent to relevant persons within each institution responsible for research requests, and through snowballing with existing contacts.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature, allowing the attainment of points of view through conversation (Burgess 1982). This is particularly useful when attempting to reach a deeper understanding of an under-researched phenomenon. Further, as well as allowing for an effective two-way conversation, respondents had the flexibility to discuss other relevant topics which may or may not have previously been considered. Finally, and importantly, semi-structured interviews expedited the potential of not only providing answers to some of the pertinent questions of the study, but also illuminating the reasoning behind them. In this regard, it should be mentioned that the research adopted a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2012). Charmaz (2012) argues that, at its core, the researcher should remain open to all possible theoretical understandings, develop tentative interpretations about these data through codes and nascent changes, and return to the field to gather more data to check and refine major categories. This was critical to developing empirical understandings based within theoretical underpinnings of social capital within this account.

**Internal informal relationships**

One core consideration to emerge from the data was that Prevent is not evenly distributed across the county, regardless of type of institution. This was attributed to a number of reasons, with two in particular. First, as one teacher explained, “...the depth of acceptance and drive of Prevent depends on if there is someone at the school who is committed to it and someone who drives it” (R38 Interview, Teacher). Second, the level of engagement with Prevent is contingent upon the perceived risk of threat as compared to other safeguarding issues. Therefore, Prevent duty was seen as “low priority” amongst some of the respondents interviewed within the study. As one DSL outlined, “...our focus is on noting vulnerabilities with crime exploitation, child sexual exploitation and county lines. These are the real issues that we are dealing with on a daily basis” (R37 interview, DSL/DDSL). This becomes particularly poignant when considering measures of austerity in schools and colleges, leading to serious restrictions on resources.

In this regard, some schools and colleges within the sample seemed to be extremely au fait with Prevent, which included regular training for all staff, updated guidance, a general awareness of developments with the duty, and clear strategies of how it will be implemented. For other institutions, there appeared to be, in places, relatively low-levels of confidence, knowledge, training, and awareness of Prevent with teachers. This sometimes extended to the safeguarding leads. For instance, with certain (albeit very small numbers of) DSLs within the sample, there seemed to be a real lack of certainty when it came to engaging with Prevent. As one explained, “it sort of sits with me...I think I would be a liar if I said I was really confident with all this” (R9 Interview, DSL/DDSL).

Within the research, most institutions resided somewhere in between these two positions. However, the findings indicated that even if teachers appeared to have low levels of knowledge and experience, the vast majority (though as mentioned not all) of DSLs and DDSLs within the study often had a good depth of understanding of the duty. These safeguarding leads were considered to be the focal point of assessing and making decisions relating to Prevent. A part of how this was enacted on the ground depended on the internal relationships that existed between teachers,
safeguarding leads, headteachers, and others within schools and colleges. Although these were important networks for numerous reasons, they were often complex in nature. In addition, although the respondents’ general perception and reception of the duty reflected findings in wider research – i.e. that overt professional opposition was limited (see Busher et al. 2017; Busher, Choudhury, and Thomas 2019) – there were some tensions raised.

For one, due to the sensitive nature of Prevent, the data suggested that some teachers passed responsibility up to DSLs/DDSLs, which was considered as a method to “protect themselves”. As one respondent explained, “But if you do everything you can and you walk out of the door at the end of the day thinking, ‘well I’ve done my bit’. Unfortunately, that is the attitude you have to take because it shouldn’t be a backside covering exercise but it turns out to be sometimes” (R32 Interview, DSL/DDSL). Cases were also passed to DSLs/DDSLs as there were fears of missing the signs of a student being “at risk”. As another respondent outlined, “it is a better safe than sorry scenario both in terms of obviously protecting a vulnerable young person but also to an extent protecting yourself and your institution. There’s always that sort of ‘what if’” (R34 Interview, DSL/DDSL). Across the sample, it appeared that although the shifting of responsibility was a consideration with some teachers, the predominant concern was the safeguarding of students from potential risks, including radicalisation.

In this regard, the data strongly suggested that informal relationships and a focussed point of reference, i.e. a safeguarding lead, worked towards helping teachers to build confidence within the duty and reduce some of the aforementioned associated anxieties. This was particularly the case considering that the vast majority were concerned with the effects erroneous referrals could have on students and their families. In fact, one teacher went as far as stating, “I’ve seen people tear themselves apart over a weekend trying to think out about whether they’ve made the right decision or not” (R20 Interview, DSL/DDSL). As a result of these concerns, internal informal relationships that draw upon experience and knowledge increase in importance, which lends weight to the social capital framework discussed at the fore of this article:

“...referrals that you are going to make will have an impact on a child’s life. And actually, [if] there is anything it is always best to seek advice. And I think that’s what safeguarding teams are really good at doing, actually, is working together.” (R31 Interview, DSL/DDSL)

**Social capital and agency**

Within the data, interviewees spoke in detail of the relationships that exist within schools – many of which occur on an informal basis, i.e. without needing formal referrals – between teachers (and other staff) and safeguarding leads. Respondents talked about the value of drawing upon existing experience and knowledge from DSLs and DDSLs which not only provided teachers with a level of comfortability and support, but also worked to reduce the potential effects of erroneous referrals:

“...talking it over with the safeguarding colleagues who have years of experience...I don’t think I’ve ever felt out of my depth or gosh, “who do I turn to with this?”, or “what do I do?” I’ve never felt that way and there are always people that I can go to. [name deleted] is my line manager and he’s always had a wealth of knowledge around safeguarding, and...I would feel comfortable going and speaking to him about anything. (R18 Interview, Teacher)

The value of these informal relationships beyond building trust within institutions and reducing anxieties with the duty was grounded in the exchange of capital and was accentuated throughout the data. For one, the avoidance of some erroneous referrals appeared to be prevalent at times. In this regard, respondents presented numerous examples of potential erroneous referrals, including
ones that could possibly be considered as discriminatory in nature. These were incidents that could potentially affect the young person and their peers’ mental health and lives, and wider relationships with teachers, the school/college, and the police:

“I have had things come up under radicalisation and extremism and it has been things about holidays to those sorts of areas that people would associate with Muslim communities, for example . . . and I have looked at them and got back to the teacher and said, “If all they have told you is that is where they are going on holiday you can’t look at that as potentially dangerous as why is it different than going to Europe for example?” So, some of that I think it does make people think about different sort of races, genders all of that, it does come into it.” (R28 Interview, DSL/DDSL)

Examples of this nature allude to the arguments outlined within wider research presented at the fore of this article which discuss how the concerns associated with Prevent duty can begin to be alleviated with the exertion of agency (and resultantly, social capital). This is particularly relevant to consider as the data paralleled wider findings around teachers, and safeguarding leads for that matter, being uncomfortable with “spotting the signs of radicalisation” beyond obvious violent threats or declarations of allegiance to proscribed groups (Moffat and Gerard 2019). Numerous respondents, including Prevent co-ordinators at the local level, explained how most referrals were extremely nuanced and complex. When posed the question of how do they spot the signs of radicalisation, many respondents talked of “instinct” and noticing when “some-thing doesn’t feel right”:

“Oh my god. I wish I knew, genuinely. I’m in this position trying to make this decision. I really wish I knew [how to spot the signs of radicalisation]. Instinct, as much as anything else.” (R20 Interview, DSL/DDSL)

“I guess you can’t [spot all signs of radicalisation]…you have just got to attune to be aware. So, I think it is not that there are young people who could be going down all sorts of extreme routes and you need to be spotting it, but more a case that you need to make sure that nothing that raises that question in your mind isn’t passed on. But I guess that counters with the idea that are you then going to unleash a whole nightmare stuff on a young person based on one relatively innocuous comment?” (R21 interview, Teacher)

The final sentence of the respondent quote above – “unleash a whole nightmare stuff on a young person based on one relatively innocuous comment” – alludes to previous arguments, but once again reiterates the value played by social capital (in terms of knowledge sharing to gain a fuller understanding of the issue). The importance here is then about being able to construct a broader understanding, rather than referring people through Channel for visiting family abroad, or poorly drawn cucumbers (Quinn 2016), or what respondents referred to as “stupid comments” – something they argued were often made by those going through adolescence:

“...we work very closely together, and we would go, ‘Oh, he’s pressed the stupid button’...this is a young person, [and they] just said the most inappropriate thing. Really, we have to be so proportionate with the way we tackle this because, yes, you do have to look at it and just double-check that there’s nothing else there, but, on the whole, most of them are just a bit misguided with the things that they’ve done and said.” (R19 Interview, County Council)

This was reiterated during an interview with a Prevent police officer:

“...someone simply making a racist comment doesn’t mean that they are going to be drawn into terrorism and vulnerable to radicalisation...when we talk to people we say, “If you spot
something...discuss it with usually a senior advisor or safeguarding lead to try and work out whether that is something that should be referred on”...and at that point the safeguarding lead may say, “Well actually this isn’t a one off, off the cuff comment,” which they can dismiss as being silly teenage mouthing off or attention seeking, which I think we do sometimes have referrals like that.” (R23 Interview, Sussex Police)

This is then about fostering a joint effort within schools and colleges. For some DSLs and DDSLs within the research it was about creating a culture in which teachers felt comfortable approaching others for advice. This was particularly relevant considering the potentially complex nature of understanding whether a student is “at risk” or not, as one DSL explained, it’s “...about keeping staff aware that it’s okay to not know the answers. It’s okay to ask for support, and actually the opposite is worse” (R35 Interview, DSL/DDSL). As stressed by numerous respondents within the data, this is about appreciating the value of “building up a bigger picture”:

“So, we say “if you are worried about something, if you’re concerned, it’s much better to come and talk to us...because it helps us build a picture. So, it might be something really little...any small things are often, can be when seen as a bigger picture, could indicate something bigger.” (R31 interview, DSL/DDSL)

*Overarching responsibilities*

It is critical to consider, however, that although there appears to be, and to some extent is, an ethos of team effort in regards to Prevent duty and safeguarding more widely, the focus was still concentrated on the DSLs (and to some extent DDSLs). As well as the psychological burden of such a strenuous responsibility, there was overwhelming agreement that DSLs were overworked and overburdened. This can lead, as one DSL explained, to “stress-related sickness” (R30 Interview, DSL/DDSL), something he claimed he had witnessed with colleagues in his own and other schools on numerous occasions. The impact this role had on individuals who had other responsibilities within the school – such as teaching, head of department, assistant head, amongst others – was clear from speaking to numerous respondents:

“It is really hard...I do think that as a school we need a person. Well I don’t know whether it needs to be a teaching member of staff or non-teaching, but somebody with the responsibility for this and at the moment, but I know I don’t have enough time and it worries me.” (R9 Interview, DSL)

“...we haven’t got the capacity to deal with everything that it might throw up as a potential safeguarding concern, if I’m honest.” (R2 Interview, DSL/DDSL)

However, schools and colleges within the study were clear about the critical role played by safeguarding leads, particularly in respect to making important informed decisions based on collected evidence. An aspect that was regularly raised was the value in having dedicated DSLs within schools and colleges, ones who did not have additional responsibility beyond safeguarding. Having a dedicated DSL, someone who could solely focus upon the role, was thought by some to be the ideal situation (though financial restrictions exist). This is particularly the case when considering the DSLs have overarching responsibility for a number of important and potentially critical aspects of safeguarding that could be detrimental to a child and their family, particularly if not undertaken correctly:

“I’m more confident now that nothing will slip through the net but when, you know, if I go back six months...I remember sitting down with my colleague and saying, “Do you know what, we just need to be really careful, there is a danger that we might miss something, something might slip
through the net,” and that sort of reinforced the decision really that it was the right one to go ahead and appoint somebody [as a dedicated DSL]...the biggest barrier would be for us [was] the funding element of it...” (R30 Interview, DSL/DDSL)

In sum, the implementation of Prevent duty within schools and colleges thus relies upon a combination of formal and informal processes, with procedures becoming increasingly formalised at higher levels of responsibility. For the majority of teachers and other staff in schools and colleges, enacting the Prevent duty normally entailed an informal conversation (or email) with a DSL, or logging an incident on an internal safeguarding system (all logs are assessed by a DSL/DDSL). For the DSL, these informal and formal processes allow them to build up a picture of the student “at risk”. As many teachers explained, one incident is often not enough to determine if a student needs support. It is the combination of these factors that allow safeguarding measures to be robust enough to facilitate necessary intervention, but also flexible enough to enable individual judgement in the often-ambiguous landscape of safeguarding. However, the data strongly indicated that the DSLs sometimes needed support themselves and access to social capital, often held outside of the institution.

**External informal relationships**

Within the sample, it was not uncommon for some DSLs within schools and colleges to establish informal networks and relationships with those responsible for the implementation of Prevent and Channel in external organisations. This included individuals within Sussex Police, local and county councils, and safeguarding leads within other schools and colleges. When these relationships did exist, they appeared to mostly be predicated on mutual trust, transparency and respect. These individuals working on Prevent within various institutions are core nodes within the social capital framework, considered to be critical repositories of knowledge. A number of safeguarding leads within the sample spoke of their comfortability with having an anonymous “chat” with a Prevent officer to ask their general advice on situations potentially relating to the duty and students considered to be “at risk”. Here, it should be asserted that “anonymous” refers to having informal conversations without identifying the student or disclosing any personal information.

**Social capital: drawing upon existing knowledge, experience and advice**

As mentioned within the previous empirical section, the Prevent duty was often not at the forefront of concern for DSLs and their respective schools/colleges. Once again, this was due to other pressing safeguarding matters, particularly poignant if they deemed the risk of radicalisation to generally be low within their institution. As also outlined, the data strongly reported that DSLs were often overburdened with several responsibilities in addition to their existing safeguarding duties. Having these informal relationships with police and others at the local level enabled them to draw upon capital when required, in the form of existing knowledge, experience, and advice. These ideas of social capital were consistent throughout the research, as one DSL explained:

“I normally have a conversation with that teacher first and then I quite often will have a conversation with somebody on the Channel [panel]...just to get second thoughts...So, one of them I definitely remember having a conversation first to see if I should actually go ahead and refer. There is advice out there to help me if I’ve got doubts. Yes, because it’s not something which you do very often and it’s a whole way of practice which I don’t really have any experience of, looking at what is regarded as being a risk, what’s not being regarded as a risk...So, they’re obviously much more
familiar with the levels of concern with the whole process. It’s really important to be able to speak to somebody with a bit of expertise.” (R36 Interview, DSL/DDSL)

However, as told by another interviewee, this does not appear to be the case across the country:

“I was at a meeting in [name deleted] the other week, and I spoke to my counterpart in [name deleted]. He doesn’t have any, sort of, co-sharing of information with the police.” (R19 Interview, County Council)

As mentioned, these external relationships consist of individuals within numerous organisations working on Prevent and safeguarding agendas at the local level within Sussex, with the two most cited being Sussex Police and councils across the county. In terms of the police, it appears (albeit from extremely limited data) that they advocate both engaging in informal discussions regarding those deemed to be “at risk” and to “encourage reporting” if in doubt (R23 Interview, Sussex Police), employing a “better safe than sorry” attitude. This was echoed, to some extent, within local and county councils, as one respondent explained:

“But the problem is that some schools, some teachers have not had the experiences of MASH [Multi Agency Safeguarding Hubs]. So, they don’t feel confident and don’t feel happy about referring cases like that into MASH. I think sometimes they feel that it has to be quite high level before they actually make a referral and we’re stuck with that model…but we probably need to do some more work about reassuring schools that the threshold doesn’t need to be that high and even though it doesn’t make the MASH threshold, doesn’t mean that no action would be taken”. (R5 Interview, County Council)

From in-depth conversations with these respondents, it was clear they do not intend to criminalise those considered to be at risk, asserting that Prevent is a “pre-criminal space”. Further, that referring those deemed to be at risk would enable a wider conversation and assessment, “...explaining to them [teachers] that actually referral to Prevent isn’t about being in trouble with the police it is actually about completely the opposite. It is about trying to keep people out of the criminal justice system” (R23 Interview, Sussex Police). From the DSLs’ point of view, however, with consideration of the aforementioned apprehensions with the duty, many were generally concerned with the detrimental effects erroneous referrals could have on their students. To some small or greater extent, within Sussex, the relationships that existed between some DSLs and external partners allowed them to alleviate these concerns when they were able to have informal conversations with Prevent police officers and those at the local level to discuss cases they believed could be at risk, though were not fully sure:

“...we have got a really good relationship with him [police officer] and I would say to [name deleted], “Look I have got concerns about this and what do you think? Matter for Prevent or get the parents in anyway as we have to do that? What do you think is the right thing to do?” He will give me his advice...Then I will think about it and then I will make the decision.” (R33 Interview, DSL/DDSL)

Similar relationships existed with local and county councils, as one member of a county council explained:

“...on Thursday a DSL rang me and said, “Could I just pick your brain for a minute, what do you think?” It is that relationship and I think they have got a really hard job...It is that notice- check-share thing, and often they check with someone in Sussex, if she is a referral or not...they might ring me, or they might email me and say, “What do you think?”...I might ring [name deleted] and say
“what do you think about this, is there anything here?” I think that is really important actually, the relationship. (R13 Interview, County Council)

When drilling down to better understand how and why these relationships initially developed and were able to continue working in this mode, numerous respondents mentioned specific individuals across the county who they felt were key and influential within these networks. They asserted these people were responsible for driving and maintaining this culture, as one county council employee explained, “there is quite a lot of joined up thinking now, or at least certainly the way [name deleted] works is she really likes to make sure everyone is in the loop...and there is some joined up work and joined up thinking...I have a very good close working relationship which I imagine could have been quite difficult, but it is not. I think it has been set up quite well.” (R14 Interview, County Council)

During conversations with some of these “key individuals”, it was evident that the culture of working closely together was something they had personally fostered at the local level. Although, as mentioned at the fore of this article, the duty and other associated publications, including Channel Guidance, do recommend that sectors need to collaborate with relevant external partners (HM Government 2019), it appears at least in parts of Sussex that this was not occurring as well as it could have been; an issue these key individuals sought to change. This is particularly important when considering, through respondents’ own experiences, how Prevent is often not standalone and connected to other safeguarding issues. Although, the following respondent spoke about the situation post referral, the culture of working together can be applied within the context of this article:

“What was happening was that referral was going to the police and we weren’t hearing about it for a long time. A lot of these young people had special needs...and a lot of them had social workers and other interventions going on that the police didn’t know about either. So, not a lot of talking was going on...and that was quite evident after that first, sort of, six months, and I spoke to the police and I spoke to our safeguarding leads, and we changed it for that reason.” (R19 Interview, County Council)

**Erroneous referrals**

Moving forward, one key message to emerge was that these informal relationships, to some extent, have the potential to impact the number of erroneous cases referred through Channel (as mentioned at various places throughout this article). Much of this, linking to conceptions of social capital, is due to respondents feeling the ability to draw upon existing experience and expertise, and, when unsure, being able to informally ask advice in what one respondent described as a “quite lonely” space (R33 Interview, DSL/ DDSL). Although the consideration of reducing erroneous referrals was not discussed explicitly by all respondents across the various sectors interviewed, it was an underlying concern for many. One respondent working at the county council level outlined how not all schools in their local area made use of having informal conversations, which they believed led to an increase in the number of referrals that were eventually dropped for not being “at risk”:

“...the model that has been recommended is that if a school makes a referral, first they speak to me as a gatekeeper. There are various people like me operating in the same capacity in the county. So, if they speak to one of us and we say yes, actually it sounds like it’s worth making a referral...not all schools are doing that, some are just putting in the referral, and having spoken to the police Prevent supervisor last week, he said ‘I’ve just closed quite a considerable number because they just didn’t meet the threshold.’” (R5 Interview, County Council)
This highlights an apparent contradiction within the data where on the one hand the majority of respondents argued that they were reluctant to refer students in case of erroneous referrals, but on the other, as outlined by the abovementioned respondent, some “probably [make] those referrals just thinking ‘well whatever happens we’d rather do the belt and braces approach, rather than get caught out’” (R5 Interview, County Council). In fact, a number of teachers and safeguarding leads mentioned the “better safe than sorry” approach (R34 Interview, DSL/DDSL), or to “err on the side of caution” (R8 Interview, DSL/DDSL). This reflected the arguments made in the previous empirical section which discussed the motivation being to both protect vulnerable individuals as well as oneself and the institution from criticism and repercussion. Within these two positions there is of course much grey and complexity. In reality, even within institutions, different people will hold differing opinions. To determine this, the data demonstrated a number of real-life examples which outlined the potential for erroneous referrals, ones that were in fact potentially quite (unintentionally) discriminatory in nature, though relied upon the capital of others:

“I have had a student who had an absence that my colleague has just been dealing with because he was visiting family in Pakistan for several weeks. And I just happened to say, ‘Are you passing that on because it could be a Prevent thing as an unexplained absence in that part of the world?’…And she was like, ‘Oh I could never have thought of it like that.’ And it is good, actually her family originate from India and she actually said she spends a lot of the year there. She said, ‘I used to go back there a lot when I was a kid and I would hate to think someone was then questioning me because I was spending time there.’ And I was like, ‘Yes you are right...’” (R21 Interview, Teacher)

As has been mentioned and alluded to throughout both empirical sections, the role of trust and transparency is critical to ensuring these informal relationships continue to operate in the manner intended. To add to this, open communications and co-production are also crucial (Lakhani and Bernard 2017). At the core of these networks are people, without whom these relationships would of course not exist. Thus, some of the respondents asserted how these individuals need to stay in their current roles in order to maintain these relationships, emphasising the value of “keeping the same faces”, as one respondent argued (R39 Interview, County Council). This becomes particularly difficult as the vast majority of schools and colleges do not need to be in contact with Prevent teams often, if at all. As one DSL explained, “maintaining those relationships is difficult if you are not using them constantly and that is the paradox that you don’t want to have to use them. So yes, I think the Prevent officer we have is great at keeping those lines of communication open” (R32 Interview, DSL). If these internal and external relationships can be maintained, the benefits are evident.

Discussion

This article has investigated the implementation of Prevent duty within schools and colleges across the county of Sussex. Through the collection and analysis of qualitative empirical data embedded within a social capital framework, this paper has specifically explored the role played by informal relationships relative to the identification, referral and support of those students considered to be “at risk of radicalisation” or “being drawn into terrorism” (HM Government 2015a, 4). The data found that as Prevent is not evenly distributed across the county – in terms of knowledge, training and in-depth awareness – teachers and DSLs were accessing wider informal support and guidance when required. The findings indicated that those who maintained and engaged in these informal relationships, both internally within educational institutions and externally with public-sector agencies, also spoke of higher levels of confidence with the duty.
Thus, the research established that although Prevent duty is a statutory requirement with formal processes providing guidance for action, the framework has enough flexibility for those tasked with its implementation – at least within schools and colleges – to enact agency (to some extent). As Hacking (1995) aptly argues, people have agency where they are able to react, interpret and adapt to the new set of circumstances they find themselves in. This by no means attempts to undermine the concerns reported about the duty in wider research, as outlined in more detail in the introduction. It has not been the intent here to make judgement on the value of the duty in itself, nor does this article provide a critique of Prevent as a brand in the traditional sense. What it endeavours to do is to illuminate how these practices can help to navigate some of the aforementioned potential concerns associated with the duty. Here, with both the internal and external relationshipships, there was reliance upon some of the core foundations of social capital (Putnam 2000; Julien 2015; Lin 1999), including access to existing practices, experience, ideas, networks, norms, and knowledge exchange.

Within the data, a number of respondents sought out necessary resources through existing relationships and networks of learned expertise, cultures, and practices, and developed new relationships when required by building upon this capital in an attempt to overcome the perceived challenges the duty brought with it. Putnam’s (2000) concepts of “bridging” and “bonding” help to unpick these ideas which, when combined, posit the notion that through social networks, opportunities for information or new resources can be facilitated. The bonding aspect, according to Williams (2006), helps to provide emotional support (an issue generally overlooked within the Prevent agenda), and enables mobilisation. The knowledge schools and colleges can access, i.e. drawn from existing safeguarding procedures (Busher et al. 2017; Busher, Choudhury, and Thomas 2019), and networks they can approach (internally and externally), can be deconstructed in this way to better understand the capacity for them to act in their current spaces, and the necessity – and ability – for them to enact some sort of agency when considering the duty.

The informality of these relationships was also critical as the vast majority of respondents appeared to be conscious of some of the potential issues associated with the duty and its implementation; allowing them, as mentioned previously, to begin to “negotiate the tensions of Prevent” (Heath-Kelly and Strausz 2019, 106). However, when it came to maintaining equilibrium with the duty, there were some subtle contradictions within the study. As has been demonstrated in wider research (Busher et al. 2017; Busher, Choudhury, and Thomas 2019), these potential contradictions more than likely relate to respondents being fearful of both stigmatisation as well as missing opportunities to safeguard students. This was particularly relevant when considering broader findings which outline “the difficulty of judging the signs of radicalisation and knowing the threshold for making a formal report” (Moffat and Gerard 2019, 10).

What needs to be considered within this narrative is that education referrals amount to the highest across sectors with Prevent duty (Home Office 2019). Although part of this could be due to placing Prevent duty within wider safeguarding responsibilities (Busher, Choudhury, and Thomas 2019), there are other factors of importance to consider, such as context (or more so, the lack of). For example, within the data there was apprehension that some students could be referred incorrectly for making what was described as “stupid comments”, i.e. those that presented the image of students being “at risk”, though in reality were linked to issues of adolescence. In order to mitigate this, respondents within the sample were clear that a team effort within schools and colleges enabled DSLs to “build up a picture” and make decisions about referrals which were based on evidence gathered from numerous sources.

In turn, some DSLs spoke of the value of “having a chat” in an informal capacity with external partners when they were unsure whether students had met the threshold to be referred through
Channel. The results indicated that these informal relationships have the potential to foster trust and transparency, and work to mitigate wider issues such as a potential destroying of trust between teachers and students (Moffat and Gerard 2019). As with the internal relationships mentioned above, these external informal relationships also appeared to have some effect on perceptions and actualities of erroneous referrals, whereby students are referred through Channel for what transpire to be behaviours and comments that do not warrant recommendation (see also Busher, Choudhury, and Thomas 2019), predominantly due to the ill-defined nature of “radicalisation” as a concept (O’Donnell 2016). This is particularly relevant when considering wider statistics. For example, the 2017/18 overall referrals for Channel both nationally and for Sussex show that only around 18% were considered at Channel Panels (Home Office 2018; FOI 2019), demonstrating that high levels of referrals did not meet the threshold.

However, there are wider considerations here. For one, there must be some caution with overburdening (already overstrained) safeguarding leads (Busher et al. 2017). The data was clear that those schools and colleges with dedicated DSLs, i.e. those with no other teaching or administrative responsibilities, were the most confident with the duty. In this regard, there should also be the avoidance of over-dependency and over-reliance on external agencies and contacts. As demonstrated in research undertaken by Ofsted (2016), this has the potential to lead to fragmented support, and inconsistent and conflicting messages. Further, it must also be considered that agency can have negative implications, particularly when influenced by external sources such as the media, with Heath-Kelly (2017) arguing that those on the frontline of implementing the duty are not immune to Islamophobic discourses, as one example.

This leads to broader discussions around the potential limitations of the research. Although there was little evidence to suggest otherwise, some consideration must be given to the validity of the data. As Wright Mills (1940, 904) argues, “human actors do vocalize and impute motives to themselves and others.” As data were exclusively collected with those responsible for the implementation of Prevent duty, its target audience may well hold different opinions. To date, little research has been conducted with students, something that is critical for future work to be able to determine a more holistic examination. This will also help to better determine whether experiencing Prevent differs across racial and religious lines (Rights Watch UK 2016; Jerome, Elwick, and Kazim 2019; Busher et al. 2017), particularly as Sussex is considered to be a homogenous region compared to the rest of the country more broadly.

Further, as well as it being extremely difficult to measure the impact informal relationships have on erroneous referrals, there is of course no guarantee that they will reduce them in the first instance. However, the data, at least anecdotally, implied that there is strong potential here to do so, particularly from the examples given of this operating in practice. In addition, and as should be expected, the data was complicated where respondents often struggled with maintaining balance between avoiding erroneous referrals and the “just in case” deliberations, where there was a fear of students who were at risk of slipping through the proverbial net. The data demonstrated that through social capital and agency, these positions can at least begin to be negotiated. It can be posited that if these informal practices result in the reduction of even a small number of erroneous referrals it not only lessens the load of Channel, but arguably more importantly, it prevents some individuals and their families from having to experience Prevent, which can of course be strenuous. This is particularly the case for young people who are still developing their sense of self and constructing worldviews about the different structures around them, including educators, the police, the government, and others. Respondents were aware of the implications this could have on the students’ mental health, education, ambitions, and friendships, amongst other factors (Lakhani 2012) – something wider literature describes as “inherently stigmatising and intensely intimidating”
(Open Society Justice Initiative 2016) – and were thus keen to reduce the risk of such action occurring.

In conclusion, what these findings demonstrate is that as well as the content of Prevent duty itself, wider considerations around agency (Elwick and Jerome 2019; Jerome, Elwick, and Kazim 2019), social capital, and informal networks are also critical factors within the broader analysis. As Molotch (2012) asserts, in the post 9/11 age, society is increasingly more likely to look to technology or legislation to resolve security issues. However, the decision to adopt these strategies is not always based on evidence showing them to be the best approaches to countering the threat of terrorism. Problems are often solved by humans using informal social practices. Within the Prevent agenda, this opportunity for informal working needs to be protected, whereby an overbearing formalisation of the system could be counter-productive. As well as potentially affecting levels of erroneous referrals, this could also impact levels of confidence and trust within the duty.

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References


**Endnotes**

1 Channel, normally co-ordinated by the relevant police force, “is a programme which focuses on providing support at an early stage to people who are identified as being vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism. The programme uses a multi-agency approach to protect vulnerable people by: (a) identifying individuals at risk; (b) assessing the nature and extent of that risk; and (c) developing the most appropriate support plan for the individuals concerned.” (HM Government 2015, 5).

2 Similar findings were outlined in Busher et al. (2017).

3 Although specifically focussing upon further education, parallels can be drawn here with wider research conducted by Ofsted (2016).

4 Similar findings were outlined by Dresser (2019).

5 Dresser (2019, 617) reports similar findings in terms of “if in doubt”, arguing that the Prevent police officers preferred responding to a “wealth of reports and referrals” to avoid “missing crucial opportunities to offer vulnerable individuals support”.

6 An example of this could be the potential links between crime and extremism (see Lakhani 2020, for example).

7 2018/19 statistics were not available for Sussex at the time of writing.

8 There should also be consideration of differing experiences across class and wider socio-economic divides.