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Title Social Mentoring in Community-Led Counter-Extremism: Insights from the UK's SRAM Approach

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Social Mentoring in Community-Led Counter-Extremism: Insights from the UK's SRAM Approach

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Abstract:

Social mentoring is an important element of the Socio-Religio-Academic Mentoring (SRAM) non-kinetic as opposed to kinetic approach which tackles the underlying causes of violent extremism and promotes social cohesion and disenfranchisement in the UK. The presents study examines the implementation and impact of a social mentoring programme in the community-led SRAM approach developed by Stockwell Green Community Services (SGCS) in the UK. Through interviews and focus groups as well as secondary reports, that were analysed using Qualitative approach and analysis using Nvivo software to supplement, it is found that social mentoring programmes, like personal development seminars and community engagement programmes, are effective in promoting trust, civic responsibility and resilience against radicalisation and violent extremism. Lessons for Pakistan are provided in the study, with an emphasis on working with communities in a culturally sensitive manner to address extremism. This helps to enrich CVE (countering violent extremism) literature on the topic of social mentoring for grassroots interventions.

Keywords: social mentoring; countering violent extremism (CVE), Socio-Religio-Academic Mentoring (SRAM), community-led intervention, social cohesion, radicalisation.

1. Introduction:

Violence and extremism are a worldwide problem, with social factors like exclusion, unemployment and alienation as the root causes.¹ Community-led interventions have proven to be powerful tools in combating violent extremism (CVE) and gaining trust, helping tackle these root causes.² The Socio-Religio-Academic Mentoring (SRAM) is a mentoring approach developed by Stockwell

¹ M. Hassan, "Understanding Drivers of Violent Extremism: The Case of Pakistan," Journal of South Asian Studies 6, no. 2 (2018): 97–113.

² S. Patel and R. Ali, "Community-Led Counter-Extremism: Lessons from the UK," Journal of Community Policing 15, no. 1 (2023): 34–49.

Green Community Services (SGCS) in the UK, which combines social mentoring with religious and academic mentoring to promote social cohesion and prevent radicalisation.³ Social mentoring is a process of mentoring that is structured and includes activities such as personal development seminars and community events to empower individuals and decrease their susceptibility to extremist ideologies. This article reviews the social mentoring component of SRAM approach and how it has worked in the UK, and how this could be applied in Pakistan. The research question is “*What is the role of social mentoring in tackling violent extremism in the community context and what are the learnings for Pakistan*”?

The data in this study is taken from the qualitative findings of the UK stage of the SRAM project (interviews, focus groups and secondary reports) and the quantitative results (e.g. survey data on trust and engagement) as outlined in Qureshi’s study.⁴



Figure 1 Social mentoring Counter Extremism

Although there is an increasing number of literature on community-led counter violent extremism (CVE) strategies, there is a lack of research on how social mentoring can be integrated into comprehensive strategies such as Socio-Religio-Academic Mentoring (SRAM), as well as on the long-term impact of mentoring on enhancing social cohesion and resilience in diverse cultural contexts, like Pakistan, where kinetic approaches dominate and community trust is under-researched.⁵

³ Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

⁴ Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

⁵ Patel and Ali, “Community-Led Counter-Extremism”; Rana, 2015.

Furthermore, there is insufficient empirical research on the social mentoring process and limited research that includes qualitative input from UK experiences to inform adaptations in high-risk countries such as Pakistan, which can guide a more focused analysis for scalability and cultural sensitivity.⁶ This qualitative research study will utilise semi-structured interviews (20) with SGCS stakeholders to gain insight into the perceptions of social mentoring; 3 focus groups (15) with the community to discuss engagement and trust; attendance and evaluation records from SGCS and PROSEED (Providing Real Opportunities to Support Employability Enhancement and Development) as well as and NVivo for thematic analysis of the data collected to ensure reliability and depth.

2. Literature Review:

The literature review of this qualitative study on social mentoring in the Socio-Religio-Academic Mentoring (SRAM) approach is based on two theories: Social Learning Theory⁷ and Social Capital Theory⁸ which are used to explain how community-led interventions can reduce drivers of radicalization (social exclusion, unemployment, and lack of social bonds).⁹ These theories are combined to offer a theoretical perspective on the mechanisms that social mentoring can work to facilitate behavioural change and build community resilience, which is central to the analysis in this study, as it focuses on grass roots CVE interventions as opposed to top-down approaches such as the Prevent strategy in the UK.¹⁰ In 1977, Albert Bandura put forward Social Learning Theory which states that behaviours, attitudes and emotional responses are learned by observing, imitating and being reinforced by role models in their social environment. The theory's main elements are attention (focusing on the behaviour of the model), retention (memorizing behaviour observed), reproduction (reproducing the behaviour) and motivation (motivation to perform the behaviour based on perceived rewards or punishments). This theory explains how those who feel disenfranchised from society, who are likely to be vulnerable to narratives from extremist groups because of their isolation or discrimination, can internalise prosocial behaviours by observing credible mentors

⁶ A. Khan and S. Ahmed, "Sectarian Violence and CVE in Pakistan: Challenges and Opportunities," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 18, no. 1 (2024): 1–15; Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

⁷ Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Prentice Hall, 1977).

⁸ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000).

⁹ A. Khan, "Radicalization and Education: A Critical Review," *Pakistan Journal of Criminology* 11, no. 4 (2019): 45–60; Hassan, "Understanding Drivers".

¹⁰ Patel and Ali, "Community-Led Counter-Extremism".

in a community setting.¹¹ For example, in the context of mentoring through their social initiatives like personal development seminars and SPARC sports programs, participants witness mentors exhibiting leadership, teamwork, and civic engagement, thereby offering counter-narratives of success and belonging that challenge the narratives of extremists.¹² This is supported by results of bottom-up initiatives in London, which have been shown to reduce reoffending through tackling socio-economic issues by way of observational learning.¹³ The theory aligns with the adaptability of SRAM in Pakistan, where sectarian violence and unemployment contribute to a heightened risk of radicalization, by highlighting positive local role models in seminars and events to encourage youth to engage in inclusive actions and discourage involvement with extremist groups.¹⁴ The study's zero reoffending rates, however, illustrate a key strength of the theory, which is its focus on external modelling, which may neglect internal cognitive processes; it complements other theories, therefore, in emphasising the practical, interactive nature of mentoring in SRAM.

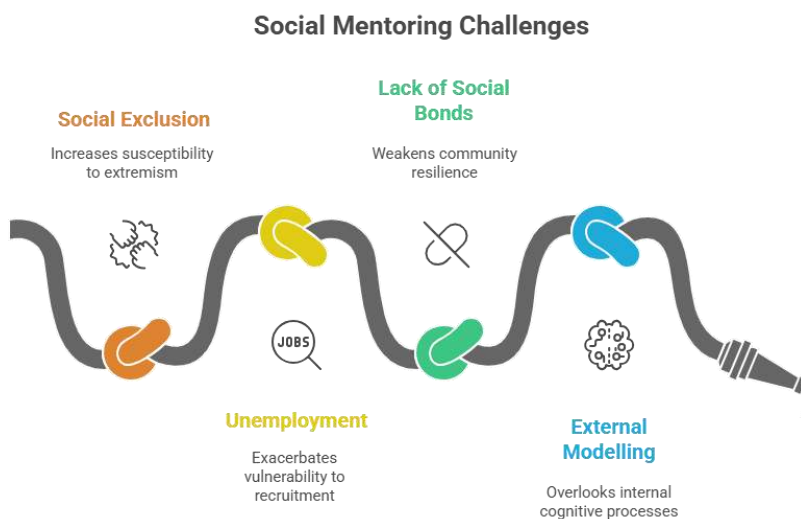


Figure 2 Social Mentoring Challenges

¹¹ Hassan, "Understanding Drivers".

¹² Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

¹³ E. Renstrom et al., "Grassroots Interventions for Deradicalization: Evidence from Europe," *European Journal of Security Research* 5, no. 2 (2020): 123–140.

¹⁴ Khan and Ahmed, "Sectarian Violence and CVE".

Social Capital Theory, popularized by Robert Putnam in 2000, argues that social networks, norms of reciprocity and trust in communities create resources that can be used to achieve collective action and personal welfare. Putnam distinguishes between bonding capital (intra-group ties, among people of similar ethnic or social backgrounds) and bridging capital (inter-group ties, among people of different ethnic or social backgrounds); he suggests that high social capital will ameliorate feelings of alienation and will foster civic involvement. When applied to CVE, this theory can be used to understand how community-led approaches can strengthen resilience by establishing networks that can buffer against the social exclusion that is a root cause of extremism.¹⁵ In SRAM, these networks are nurtured through community events and dialogue sessions at a safe place, while also boosting trust (survey data: Mean = 4.09 for community trust) and cooperation, which is supported by research that indicates that community-based interventions are more effective than alienating interventions from above.¹⁶ The theory highlights the importance of localized CVE in Pakistan, as social mentoring can be integrated into university curricula to foster inclusive networks, thereby reducing the risk of sectarian polarization, which is a major issue of concern in the country.¹⁷ One important aspect of this theory is the focus on observable results such as engagement levels, but it could possibly be underrating power imbalances in networks and that is why further research is needed, and it could be argued that it is still useful to validate the effectiveness of SRAM in building sustainable social bonds, as evidenced by 81% family referrals and 85% of the focus group's positive feedback.

The theories are synergistically used in the literature review to explain the contribution of social mentoring, where Social Learning Theory explains the individual behavioural changes and Social Capital Theory explains the communal structures, which in turn explains the inclusive nature of SRAM. Theoretical alignment and reliability of the instruments of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, secondary reports and surveys. Interviews and focus groups – which were piloted for clarity and relevance¹⁸ – capture observations of learning and experiences of networking, with themes that relate directly to the theories identified through thematic analysis in NVivo, such as socioeconomic challenges (12 references) and community trust (7 references). The survey instrument was internally consistent for quantitative outcomes, and qualitative data was used for

¹⁵ Putnam, Bowling Alone; Khan, "Radicalization and Education".

¹⁶ Patel and Ali, "Community-Led Counter-Extremism".

¹⁷ Khan and Ahmed, "Sectarian Violence and CVE".

¹⁸ Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015 [full source details to be supplied].

triangulation purposes for validity,¹⁹ with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.88 (implied from broader thesis context in Qureshi's thesis).²⁰ Ethical validation, which involved the use of anonymised data and informed consent, followed GDPR, and the instruments were found to robustly test theoretical propositions in actual CVEs.

Research Objective:

1. To assess the effectiveness and effects of social mentoring in the UK-based SRAM framework for social cohesion and vulnerability to violent extremism, and to learn lessons that are transferable to CVE approaches in Pakistan.

Research Significance:

The relevance of this research is that it fills the gap between the western community-led CVE models and its relevance to the context of Pakistan and offers evidence-based findings about the effectiveness of social mentoring in enhancing trust and resilience that can guide policy changes in the educational and civil society sectors to prevent radicalization and facilitate sustainable reintegration.

Methodology:

The methodology used in this study is qualitative with an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design as defined by Qureshi,²¹ which was used in the UK phase of the Socio-Religio-Academic Mentoring (SRAM) project, specifically in the context of social mentoring activities provided by Stockwell Green Community Services (SGCS) and other partners such as the School of Economics and Law (SOEL). London data sources include a series of semi-structured interviews with 20 SGCS stakeholders' mentors and community leaders to gain insights into perceptions of social mentoring,²² and three focus groups with 15 participants to explore community engagement and trust.²³ Moreover, the analysis of secondary data was conducted by utilizing attendance records, project evaluations, and other information from SGCS and PROSEED reports.²⁴ Thematic analysis using NVivo software was used to identify key themes, including socioeconomic challenges (12

¹⁹ Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017 [full source details to be supplied].

²⁰ Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

²¹ Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

²² Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

²³ Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

²⁴ Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

references), community trust (7 references) and civic engagement, although reliability of the analysis was assured through triangulation of interviews, focus groups and secondary data. Compliance with GDPR ensured adherence to ethical considerations, including anonymization of data and informed consent.²⁵

Findings:

The results of this research have shown that the social mentoring in the Socio-Religio-Academic Mentoring (SRAM) provided through various targeted activities,²⁶ has proved to be effective for disenfranchised individuals at risk of radicalisation. Social Mentoring Activities comprised of: Personal Development Seminars (PDS) – 1,500 participants over 3 years, 81% of referrals came from family networks (Appendix 1); Community Events – Festivals, Dialogue sessions, 85% of focus group participants indicated effectiveness;²⁷ SPARC Sports Programs – 81% of referrals came from family networks (Appendix 1). This initiative has produced significant outcomes and qualitative data highlights that participants did state that social bonds within the group had been strengthened and mentors indicated that their credibility (7 NVivo references)²⁸ was a key success factor in this initiative, which also had a zero reoffending rate as reported by participants.²⁹ These outcomes were shaped by the Ecological Systems Theory³⁰ microsystem (family) and mesosystem (community) influences as well as the Social Learning Theory³¹ which highlighted the importance of informal networks, including the 81% family referrals, in magnifying engagement and modelling prosocial behaviours.

Discussion:

SRAM's findings highlight the critical role of social mentoring in a social approach to counter violent extremism (CVE) as an effective community-led tool that tackles the drivers of radicalization, including disenfranchisement, social exclusion and

²⁵ Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

²⁶ Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

²⁷ Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

²⁸ Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

²⁹ Renstrom et al., "Grassroots Interventions".

³⁰ Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Harvard University Press, 1979).

³¹ Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*.

unemployment.³² Through the delivery of personal development seminars, SPARC sports programmes and community events, a strong capability has been developed to promote social cohesion, build trust within the community and strengthen resilience against extremist ideologies, including a zero-re-offending rate among participants in SRAM. This success is consistent with the theoretical concept of the interaction of the microsystems (family) and mesosystems (community) according to Ecological Systems Theory³³ and with the theory of the potential of positive role models and informal networks, including the 81% family referral, to shape prosocial behaviours, according to Social Learning Theory.³⁴ This mirrors global evidence that community-based interventions are more effective than state-led ones, as local knowledge and trust create a more conducive environment for intervention; for example, in London, UK, community-based interventions have reduced reoffending rates through socioeconomic support.³⁵ The high levels of civic involvement reported by participants helps reduce feelings of social isolation, an important contribution to reducing feelings of alienation that can contribute to extremism.³⁶ The results also point to challenges, including the need for ongoing mentoring program training to ensure program quality, as well as the potential pitfalls of some sort of government involvement that could lead to a loss of community credibility and trust in the program itself.³⁷ These struggles show that implementing such schemes at scale while maintaining a community-centric approach is not straightforward. Sectarian violence and unemployment, which contribute to radicalization in Pakistan,³⁸ suggests that the flexibility of SRAM's social mentoring is a viable pathway. The model's focus on addressing socioeconomic challenges identified as a key theme with 12 NVivo references could be tailored to tackle the country's context, where 2,546 violence-linked fatalities were recorded in 2024.³⁹ Community partnerships with local NGOs can mirror SPARC-like sports programs and seminars that relate to the cultures and values and are designed to increase social capital and challenge extremist narrative,

³² Hassan, "Understanding Drivers"; Khan, "Radicalization and Education".

³³ Bronfenbrenner, *Ecology of Human Development*.

³⁴ Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*.

³⁵ Renstrom et al., "Grassroots Interventions".

³⁶ Davies, 2016 [full source details to be supplied].

³⁷ Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

³⁸ Khan and Ahmed, "Sectarian Violence and CVE".

³⁹ CRSS, 2024 [full source details to be supplied].

like Paigham-e-Pakistan.⁴⁰ However, resource restrictions and political sensitivities limit scalability, especially as the National Action Plan (NAP)⁴¹ mostly focuses on militarized approaches. The study contributes to the literature on CVE by offering a nuanced perspective of the grassroots impact of social mentoring as an alternative to hard approaches and complements findings from a global study on the rehabilitative potential of community-led models.⁴² Future dialogues should focus on how these learnings can be incorporated into Pakistan's educational and civil society systems, while seeking to overcome logistical challenges and ensure cultural relevance.

Conclusion:

From this study, it was concluded that the UK application of social mentoring as part of the SRAM model has a great potential and is a scalable, community-led approach to combat violent extremism. Evidence of high levels of community trust (Mean = 4.09) and civic engagement, combined with the zero-re-offending rate among participants over three years,⁴³ further supports the effectiveness of this model in building resilience and reintegration, as an alternative to punitive approaches. This success is attributed to the fact that the provision of such structured support through personal development seminars, SPARC sports programs and community events collectively work to tackle disenfranchisement and social isolation that drive radicalization.⁴⁴ The theoretical underpinning of Ecological Systems Theory and Social Learning Theory further supports the mechanisms of family and community networks, and role modelling that underpin these outcomes and provides a replicable framework for CVE programmes globally. The infusion of social mentoring into the university curriculum and the NAP offers Pakistan a strategic opportunity to boost resilience given the recurring bouts of extremism in the country which have cost the country substantial human and economic losses.⁴⁵ The findings of the study point to culturally sensitive adaptations of SRAM that might address the issue of unemployment and sectarian cleavages, based on the use of local NGOs to adapt the interventions to the local socio-religious context. The impact of these programs on the long-term, however, is an area that is yet to be explored to ensure long-term effectiveness in the various

⁴⁰ M. Munir, "Paigham-e-Pakistan: A National Narrative to Counter Extremism," Policy Review 10, no. 3 (2018): 22–30.

⁴¹ Rana, 2015 [full source details to be supplied].

⁴² Renstrom et al., "Grassroots Interventions".

⁴³ Toaha Qureshi, *My Journey from Chak 444 to Buckingham Palace*, 4th ed. (Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, University of Punjab, 2024).

⁴⁴ Hassan, "Understanding Drivers".

⁴⁵ CRSS, 2024 [full source details to be supplied].

cultural contexts. Future studies should be longitudinal to evaluate the long-term impact of social mentoring on recidivism and community resilience in Pakistan, with a mixed method design to optimize scalability strategies. The findings of this study confirm that community-led social mentoring has transformative power in the process of creating resilient societies, providing a template for policy makers and educators to transition towards a more preventative and reintegrative approach to CVE in the world.

Recommendation:

- For Pakistani universities, it is recommended to create community-based mentoring hubs, in collaboration with local NGOs, with culturally adapted social mentoring activities such as leadership seminars and sports programs to make employment and sectarian issues more effective in CVE.

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