Countering Violent Extremism: A Realist Review for Assessing What Works, for Whom, in What Circumstances, and How?

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Countering Violent Extremism: A Realist Review for Assessing What Works, for Whom, in What Circumstances, and How?

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ABSTRACT

Scientific knowledge on what works in countering violent extremism remains limited. This article argues that we should move away from the "what works?" question and towards: "what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and how?" This method is also known as realist evaluation. This article applies the realist review method to CVE studies, which synthesizes the existing CVE literature and helps us gain insight into relevant contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes for CVE. Realist reviews help to develop and shape more effective policy and contribute to further CVE theory development.

Introduction

Europe is confronted with an increase of violent extremism and the expectation is that the security threat will rise even further in the years to come. Member States are particularly concerned about jihadist terrorism and the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, in which Europeans travel to and from the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq. But jihadist terrorism is not the only issue; right-wing and left-wing extremist violence and that of lone attackers also pose a threat.[1]

These developments further increase the need for effective counter-measures. Throughout Europe the response to this increasing threat involves different types of measures, such as more counterterrorism laws, increased security surveillance, etc., but also measures that focus on the prevention and countering of radicalisation and recruitment by improving the resilience of individuals and communities at risk, awareness raising amongst first-line practitioners, discrediting the extremist narrative via "counter-narratives," and exit-programmes such as de-radicalisation and disengagement.[2] These types of measures are commonly referred to as counter-radicalisation or countering violent extremism (CVE). Whilst CVE programmes across Europe have developed rapidly, evaluation of these preventive programmes and interventions have not developed simultaneously. In fact, after more than a decade of counter-radicalisation policy and CVE programmes, effect evaluations remain scarce.[3] To put it bluntly, as scholars we hitherto cannot answer the question of "what works" in countering violent extremism.

This article aims to explore the added value of a realist review approach to the field of CVE, where it has hitherto not been used. It starts by briefly exploring different methods for evaluation and proposes "realistic review." Realistic review, also known as realist synthesis,

revolves around the question "what works, for whom, in which context, and how?" by synthesizing existing evaluation studies.[4] One of the crucial differences between general review and realistic review is that general review attributes hierarchy to the quality of evaluations in which randomized controlled studies (RCTs) are considered best. This is highly problematic within the field of CVE as there are hardly any quantitative evaluations, let alone RCTs. By moving away from the "what works?" question and focussing on "what works, for whom, in which context, and how?" the realistic review method allows us to look at different types of studies, such as empirical evaluations that draw on quantitative or qualitative forms of data collection, but also theoretical studies and process evaluations. What follows is a realistic review of CVE studies, describing what we can learn from these studies.

Evaluation methods and CVE

When evaluating CVE, one can opt for different evaluation methods. This article will not provide an extensive overview and discussion of all the evaluation methods. Rather, it briefly discusses the different methods that have been proposed and/or applied in our field.

Effect evaluation

Effect evaluation looks at the actual outcome of a programme or intervention. Does the programme or intervention meet its objectives? Like social science more generally, this type of evaluation research is broadly speaking divided into two camps. Positivists advocate quantitative methods in which randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are often referred to as the "gold standard." By randomly dividing the target audience of an intervention into an experimental (in which the intervention is used) and a control group (no intervention, or a placebo), it seeks to establish the effectiveness and side effects of interventions, assuming a relatively direct, linear relationship between intervention and effect, but largely neglecting social context.[5] Within the field of CVE, no RCTs have been undertaken, only two quasi-experimental studies by Aldrich[6] and a quantitative longitudinal study by Feddes et al.[7] In contrast to positivists, interpretivists emphasize the role of interpretation and context.[8] By drawing on interpretive methods of data collection such as interviews or participant observation, one can provide a "thick description" of a specific intervention. However, interpretivists are criticized for only providing insight into the effectiveness of one specific intervention, in one specific context. An example of an interpretive outcome evaluation is the study of Lakhani in which 56 interviews were conducted to assess the impact of community engagement in light of the UK Prevent agenda.[9] The strengths and weaknesses of both approaches mirror each other. Interpretive evaluators argue that for interventions and programmes in which there appear to be multiple and interacting causal relationships, RCTs do not necessarily provide the answer.[10] Conversely, the downside of interpretive evaluation is that the outcome of the evaluation is not necessarily valid to other contexts.

Pragmatic evaluation

Williams and Kleinman propose utilization-focused evaluation in which stakeholders are given a significant role.[11] Horgan and Braddock suggest Multi Attribute Utility Technology (MAUT) as the most suitable evaluation model for our field as it includes a number of stakeholders in the process of *developing* a programme rather than only *ex post*

evaluating one, ensuring that multiple constituencies are accommodated.[12] Whilst Horgan and Braddock propose to use merely mathematical calculations, Williams and Kleinman favour a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. Both methods are considered as "pragmatic evaluation," which argues that evaluation should be oriented towards meeting the needs of programme decision makers and stakeholders.[13] The pragmatic approach is often criticized because of the risk that it can sometimes lean too much towards the needs of policy makers and that the evaluation is sometimes limited to a technical analytical discourse which revolves around the positive effects of the programme or intervention. Little or no room is left to look at possible negative consequences, if the programme's objectives are actually relevant to the problem situation, or what the contributive value of the intervention is for the society as a whole. Williams et al. have recently conducted an evaluation study of a US CVE programme using grounded theory and mixed methods. Whilst the results are very promising, they argue that further research is needed to assess if the programme also works in other municipalities.[14]

Theory-driven evaluation

Theory-driven evaluation looks at "policy theory" or the "theory of change," which comprise the underlying policy or scientific assumptions, partly rooted in the reflections, experience, and knowledge of practitioners and/or policy makers "on the job."[15] The merit of this type of evaluation is that it provides insight into what interventions and programmes might work in countering radicalisation, without an actual evaluation having to be conducted. Whilst a theory-driven approach to the evaluation of CVE interventions and programmes provides plausible hypotheses for what works and does not work, it does not provide the definite answer. Empirical testing still remains important, which is also highlighted in a theory-driven study of Lub in which a meta-evaluation of different CVE measures is conducted.[16]

Process evaluation

A process evaluation looks at the implementation of the intervention and if it has succeeded as planned. This type of evaluation can be very useful from a project management perspective, e.g., if all workshops of a specific programme were organized and the target audience was reached, but one cannot make any claims about the causal effectiveness of an intervention. An example of a process evaluation within CVE is that of the UK Youth Justice Board, which looks at programmes aimed at preventing violent extremism in the youth justice sector.[17]

Realist evaluation

Realist evaluation aims to identify the combination of mechanisms and contexts leading to outcome patterns, also known as context-mechanism-outcome pattern configurations (C-M-Os). These indicate how programmes activate mechanisms amongst who and in what conditions, which in turn lead to behavioural change. In short, "what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and how?"[18] Gielen has applied this method to family support of foreign fighters[19] and Veldhuis has applied it to re-integration and rehabilitation programmes for terrorist offenders.[20]

Realist review

Whilst CVE evaluations remain limited, the above discussion highlights that there are several evaluation methods that can be and currently are applied in the CVE domain. However, the risk of comparing methods is that it starts a discussion about superior and inferior evaluation methods which in turn leads to the attribution of hierarchy in CVE evaluation studies. A discussion on which studies are "better" and "best" won't help us move forward as the current studies are heterogeneous and limited and the above discussion highlights the importance of taking contextual conditions into account and including theory to establish the mechanisms that underlie an intervention or programme. More interesting is what we can learn from synthesizing the existing CVE evaluation studies. Realist review (also known as realist synthesis) is particularly helpful for this task. Realist review is a specific method within the realist evaluation tradition. It is not used to evaluate specific interventions and/or programmes, rather it synthesizes existing evaluations. Realist review is essentially a form of systematic review, but follows the realist principles and thus (also) revolves around the question: "What Works, for Whom, in What Circumstances, and How?" In contrast to traditional systematic reviews, it does not value one evaluation method over the other by attributing hierarchy to evaluation methods and realist review does not focus on mean size effects. Rather its premise is that each evaluation study can be valuable in terms of analyzing relevant contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes.[21] As a consequence, realistic review is not standardized or reproducible. It is the task of the reviewer to develop an interpretive trail that illustrates how specific evaluation studies lead to certain judgments.[22]

The method's starting point is that complex interventions aren't simple "black boxes," but generally consist of different components that don't act in a linear fashion and are highly dependent on the context in which they take place. The overarching goal of realist review is to create a middle range theory of how and why programmes work, which in turn can be used to provide policy recommendations, for either the implementation or shaping of new interventions.[21] Most realist reviews have been conducted in the healthcare sector. In those reviews researchers can quite often draw on a big body of literature for hypothesizing what might work and how it works. However, realist review is also specifically meant for those interventions and programmes where evaluation is lacking, which is the case for CVE. So as a method, realistic review would very much be suited to find out what works, for whom, how, and in which circumstances when countering violent extremism. The methodological rules for realist review are still emerging and aren't set in stone, but follow the six steps of traditional "Cochrane reviews" as conducted in the medical sector: 1) clarifying the scope of the review; 2) searching for primary studies; 3) quality appraisal; 4) extracting the data; 5) synthesizing the data, and 6) disseminating the findings. The six steps of realist review are further discussed below.

Step 1: Scope of the CVE review

The first step is to clarify the scope of the review. Like counterterrorism and counter-radicalisation, there are no clear definitions of CVE. Rather, it has become a catchphrase for a policy spectrum varying from early prevention and safeguarding measures for society, groups, and communities to very targeted measures for violent extremists such

as de-radicalisation and disengagement programmes.[23] Thus, CVE consists of a multitude of interventions and programmes, with underlying mechanisms and implemented in different contexts, leading to different outcome patterns. As a consequence, the first aim of the review is to provide an overview of studies that provide insights into relevant contexts, mechanisms, and outcome patterns in relation to countering violent extremism.

Step 2: Searching for primary CVE studies

The next step of the review is to search for primary studies. Several databases such as the Social Sciences Citation Index, CataloguePlus, and Google Scholar were searched for studies related to countering violent extremism and evaluation. Search words were countering violent extremism, CVE, violent extremism, preventing violent extremism, prevention of violent extremism, radicalisation, de-radicalisation, and countering radicalisation in combination with "evaluation" or words related to evaluation such as "impact" or "effectiveness." The search period was from 2001 until March 2017, as most CVE policy was developed after the 9/11 attacks and onwards. Inclusion criteria were studies that either empirically evaluated existing CVE programmes and specific CVE interventions or theorized about what might work for CVE based on empirical or theoretical studies. No exclusion criteria were formulated on the geographical scope as the realist review method suggests that we can learn as much from a de-radicalisation programme in Yemen as we can from a mentoring programme in the UK. However, studies that focus completely on legal or "hard" (freezing finance, waterboarding, surveillance, etc.) measures were excluded from the review. Additional exclusion criteria were studies that only looked at processes of radicalisation or violent extremism, without providing insight into how we should counter it or studies that lacked any form of methodology.

The realistic review reveals 73 different studies which are presented in Table 1.

The review reveals 14 studies that can actually be considered as "effect evaluations." Although some authors do not consider their own study as an effect evaluation, due to the lack of randomized control groups or pre- and post-measurement, these 14 studies are considered effect evaluations as they attempt to assess impact or effectiveness with the target audience of specific CVE interventions or programmes. The methodology underlying these evaluations differs: four studies are based on a quantitative methodology (of which two are quasi-experimental), nine studies have a qualitative nature (interviews, participant observation, focus groups, desk research, etc.), and one study has applied a combination of methods (theory, surveys, and focus groups). The review also shows 14 (of which five are also theory-driven) studies that can be considered as "process evaluations," which focus on the implementation and output of a specific CVE intervention or programme, by interviewing the stakeholders (policy makers, practitioners) and document analysis, etc. The remaining studies are theory-driven, in the sense that they draw on radicalisation and de-radicalisation literature (quite often based on empirical studies with the target audience) or other bodies of literature, such as the psychology of gangs and cults or the experience of practitioners, to assess what we might learn from other literature for effective CVE measures and policies. These studies do not claim to offer policy evaluations in any strict sense (proving positive or negative effects of interventions), but rather offer critical discussions of effectiveness in light of new scientific theory or empirical data.

Table 1. Overview of CVE evaluation studies.

1	Aldrich (2012)	effect evaluation (quantitative)	Counter-communication: radio-programming
2	Aldrich (2014)	effect evaluation (quantitative)	Counter-communication: radio-programming
3	Feddes *et al* . (2015)	effect evaluation (quantitative)	Resilience via group training
4	Dunn *et al* . (2016)	effect evaluation (quantitative)	Resilience via community engagement
5	Johns *et al*. (2014)	effect evaluation (qualitative)	Resilience via group training/mentoring
6	Vermeulen (2014)	effect evaluation (qualitative)	Resilience via community engagement
7	Aly (2014)	effect evaluation (qualitative)	Resilience via education
8	Kundnani (2009)	effect evaluation (qualitative)	Resilience via community engagement
9	Liht & Savage (2013)	effect evaluation (qualitative)	Resilience via group training
10	Lakhani (2012)	effect evaluation (qualitative)	Resilience via community engagement
11	Choudhury & Fenwick (2011)	effect evaluation (qualitative)	CVE Programme
12	James & Zeuthen (2014)	effect evaluation (qualitative)	CVE Programme
13	Finn *et al* . (2016)	effect evaluation (qualitative)	CVE Programme
14	Williams *et al*. (2016)	effect evaluation (combination)	CVE Programme
15	Youth Justice Board (2012)	process evaluation	CVE Programme
16	Jacoby (2016)	process evaluation	CVE Programme
17	Lamb (2013)	process evaluation	Resilience via community engagement
18	O'Toole *et al* . (2012)	process evaluation	Resilience via community engagement
19	Spalek & Davies (2012)	process evaluation	Resilience via individual mentoring
20	Moffett & Sgro (2016)	process evaluation	Family and network support/resilience via education
21	Bakker & Schuurman (2016)	process evaluation	Exit: de-radicalisation and disengagement
22	El Said (2012)	process evaluation	Exit: de-radicalisation
23	Barkindo & Bryans (2016)	process evaluation	Exit: de-radicalisation and disengagement
24	Bjorgo & Horgan eds. (2009)	theory-driven/process evaluation	Exit: de-radicalisation and disengagement
25	Demant *et al* . (2008)	theory-driven/process evaluation	Exit: de-radicalisation and disengagement
26	Horgan & Braddock 2010	theory-driven/process evaluation	Exit: de-radicalisation and disengagement
27	Stevens & Neumann (2009)	theory-driven/process evaluation	Counter-communication: counter narratives
28	Mastroe (2016)	theory-driven/process evaluation	CVE Programme
29	Greenberg (2016)	theory-driven	Counter-communication: counter narratives
30	Davies et al. (2016)	theory-driven	Counter-communication: counter narratives
31	Ferguson (2016)	theory-driven	Counter-communication
32	Beutel *et al* . (2016)	theory-driven	Counter-communication: counter narratives
33	Szmania & Fincher (2017)	theory-driven	Counter-communication: counter narratives
34	Gielen (2015)	theory-driven	Family and network support
35	Williams & Horgan (2016)	theory-driven	Family and network support
36	Lub (2013)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
37	Lindekilde (2012a)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
38	Lindekilde (2012b)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
39	Bakker (2015)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
40	Schmid (2013)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
41	Harris-Hogan *et al*. (2016)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
42	Bjorgo (2016)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
43	Thomas (2010)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
44	De Graaf & de Graaf (2010)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
45	Korn (2016)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
46	Cohen (2016)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
47	Thomas (2016)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
48	Selim (2016)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
49	Young *et al* . (2016)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
50	Kutner (2016)	theory-driven	CVE Programme
51	Ragazzi (2016)	theory-driven	CVE Programme

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

52	Spalek & Weeks (2017)	theory-driven	CVE programme
53	Mc Donald (2011)	theory-driven	Resilience via youth work
54	Stevens (2009)	theory-driven	Resilience via community engagement
55	Bigo et al . (2014)	theory-driven	Resilience via community engagement
56	Mirahmadi (2016)	theory-driven	Resilience via community engagement
57	O'Toole et al . (2016)	theory-driven	Resilience via community engagement
58	Naaz (2016)	theory-driven	Resilience via community engagement (women)
59	Weine et al. (2017)	theory-driven	Resilience via mental health
60	Quartermaine (2016)	theory-driven	Resilience via education
61	Long (2016)	theory-driven	Resilience via education
62	Ghosh et al . (2016)	theory-driven	Resilience via education
63	Weine (2012)	theory-driven	Resilience via individual, group and community engagement
64	Briggs (2010)	theory-driven	Resilience via community engagement
65	Veldhuis (2012)	theory-driven	Exit: re-habilitation and re-integration
66	Dechesne (2011)	theory-driven	Exit: de-radicalisation and disengagement
67	Demant & De Graaf (2010)	theory-driven	Exit: de-radicalisation and disengagement
68	Berger (2016)	theory-driven	Exit: disengagement
69	Henry (2016)	theory-driven	Exit: de-radicalisation and disengagement
70	Ferguson (2016)	theory-driven	Exit: de-radicalisation and disengagement
71	Hamidi (2016)	theory-driven	Exit: de-radicalisation and disengagement
72	Bastug (2016)	theory-driven	Exit: de-radicalisation and disengagement
73	Mitchell (2017)	theory-driven	Exit: de-radicalisation and disengagement

The evaluations address a wide range of interventions and programmes. Several evaluations (23) focus on "increasing resilience," which is done either individually (mentoring), on a group level (training programmes for youth at risk), or on a community level (forms of community engagement). Preventive programmes, such as counter-radicalisation programmes and "soft" counterterrorism programmes, are most discussed (24 studies). These studies look at efforts of specific countries such as Denmark, the UK, Australia, Canada, the U.S., or U.S. AID in Kenya, but also CVE programmes in general or an EU-level programme. Exit programmes, commonly known as de-radicalisation and disengagement programmes, amount to 15 studies, in the sense that they look at specific programmes and/or provide (empirically based or theory-driven) models for how one could de-radicalize or disengage. Forms of counter-communication, such as radio programming and countering online extremist content, are discussed in eight of the studies. Finally, there are two studies that specifically look at how families and networks (peers/ friends) can be effectively mobilized to counter violent extremism and one study that is a combination because it aims to increase resilience through peer networks.

Steps 3 and 4: Judging and analyzing CVE studies

Quality appraisal and extracting and synthesizing the data are respectively the third and fourth steps of realistic review. In terms of quality appraisal, traditional review attributes hierarchy to evaluations, in which randomized controlled trials are considered best. The data of the review are preferably presented in a matrix with a mean size effect and a form of judgment with respect to the quality of evaluation. This, however, would have no added value as most of the CVE studies are not comparable. To illustrate, the two studies of Aldrich with their quasi-experimental methodology and relatively positive outcomes would be qualified as the "best evaluation" and as such might also be considered as

"best practice" in CVE. However, these studies assess the effectiveness of radio programming as part of a CVE strategy in Mali, Niger, and Chad, countries in which relatively large parts of the population listen to the radio and lack other communication resources such as the Internet.[24] It would be inappropriate to recommend radio programming as a CVE best practice in general as the contexts in more digitalized (Western) countries are completely different. Realist review argues that the hierarchy in evaluations should be abandoned. Instead, the third step of the review suggests that primary studies should be valued in two different ways: the assessment of relevance—is the primary study relevant to the particular line of inquiry being pursued?; and the assessment of rigour—does it help in clarifying the particular explanatory challenge the synthesis has reached? The fourth step, extracting the data, is not about the mean size of effect, but rather about finding relevant contexts, mechanisms, and outcome patterns.[25] For this purpose, each article was analyzed in terms of the following themes: type of evaluation; type of intervention; aim of the programme or intervention; description of the programme or intervention including target group; theory of change and outcome; and finally, any lessons learned or recommendations.

Steps 5 and 6: Synthesizing the CVE studies and dissemination

Realist synthesis, the fifth step of the review, is about refinement of the programme theory—to determine what works, for whom, how, and under what circumstances.[26] Keeping these steps of judging, extracting, and synthesizing the data in mind, this review does not discuss each study separately in which "A does not work, B does, and C partially," but rather discusses relevant contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes and makes realist recommendations such as "remember mechanism X," "beware of Y," "take care of Z," etc. These realist recommendations should then be disseminated in the policy arena, which forms the sixth and final step of realist review.[27]

Realist CVE synthesis

Now the methodology of realist review has been elaborated, what can we learn from this realist review of CVE studies? This paragraph does not summarize all 73 articles separately; rather it discusses the most important context, mechanisms, outcomes, and lessons learned on a programme level and intervention level.

CVE programmes and policy

Several studies of the review are specifically dedicated to what we could learn from other programmes, countries, and literatures to shape our CVE policy. Some of those studies, but also evaluations of specific interventions, provide one of the first important lessons for the development of a CVE programme: the effectiveness of a CVE programme is very much dependent on how the programme is interpreted. If specific groups and communities negatively and disproportionally feel targeted by the CVE strategy, then this will influence the effectiveness of CVE efforts.[28] The studies also teach us that any form of CVE policy should address the grievances and causes that lead to radicalisation and violent extremism.[29] Bakker, for example, presents the Transnational Terrorism,

Security, and the Rule of Law (TTSRL) model. This TTSRL radicalisation model is a theory of change, consisting of root causes (political, economic, and cultural), identification processes, network dynamics, relative deprivation, trigger events, and personal factors (psychological characteristics and personal experiences).[30] For any CVE programme to be comprehensive, all these issues should be addressed. Similar but less extensive models are also presented by the Youth Justice Board[31] and Bigo et al.[32]

The only CVE programme that has been evaluated with mixed evaluation methods is that of the World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE), a community-based Muslim-led organization in the United States. Their CVE programme consists of three different pillars: community education, Islamic training for law enforcement and social services cooperation, and volunteerism and multi-cultural programming. Williams et al. claim it is the first evidence-based CVE-relevant programming in the United States and has the potential to be effective in other U.S. municipalities.[33]

By studying Australian CVE policy, Harris-Hogan et al. differentiate among three forms of preventive CVE strategies, which are based on a public health model. Primary CVE initiatives focus on the prevention of radicalisation and are designed to educate individuals about violent extremism and to prevent the emergence of a breeding ground for radicalisation of individuals, but can also include awareness-raising programmes for practitioners. Programmes that fall under the secondary classification consist of interventions for those who are showing signs of radicalisation, because they are engaged within an extremist social network. Tertiary-level CVE programmes are aimed at working with extremists, facilitating those already considered extremist to disengage from a violent extremist network and to desist from violent behaviour.[34] Similar forms of prevention are also recognized in the studies of Williams et al.,[35] Korn,[36] Cohen,[37] Selim,[38] and Young et al.[39]

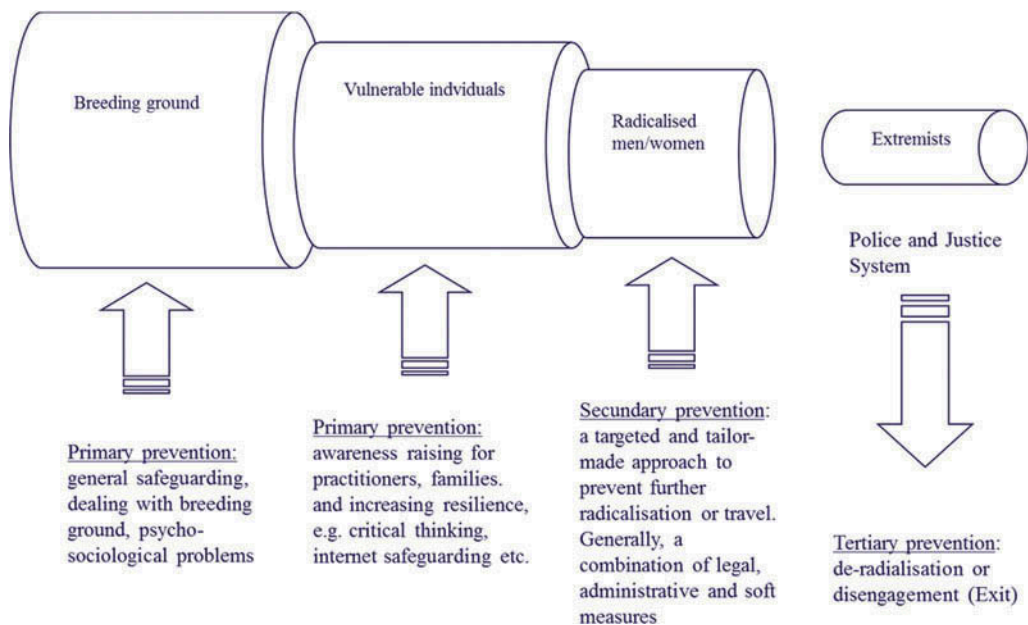This CVE prevention model has been visualized by Gielen in Figure 1.[40]

Figure 1. Overview of CVE Policy spectrum.

Lub draws lessons about the possible effectiveness of primary and secondary CVE interventions used in the Netherlands and Europe, by looking at evaluations of similar interventions (social ecological intervention, peer mediation, self-esteem enhancement, and intergroup contact interventions) implemented in different fields, such as in areas of criminal behaviour, education, or in drug/alcohol use. He concludes that the scientific basis for peer mediation and self-esteem enhancement is weak, and the basis for the social ecological approach is small. Intergroup contact on average reduces prejudices about other groups, but effect sizes are generally small and there is no evidence for a long-term impact.[41]

Resilience

As previously noted, most studies discuss the notion of "increasing resilience" and illustrate that this can be done in several ways. The study of Weine is developed along the lines of the above-mentioned public health-inspired CVE prevention model and recognizes different target audiences: vulnerable individuals, vulnerable sub-groups, and diaspora communities. Most interesting of this study is a summary of what we scientifically speaking already know about resilience and CVE: a) you can be resilient to some risks but not to others; b) resilience is formed on both an individual and social level; c) families are the strongest buffer for risk factors for violent extremism; and d) in diaspora communities, resilience is shaped by a combination of home country experiences, the refugee camp, and mainstream values of the country of residence.[42] In Weine et al.'s most recent study, the importance of mental health professionals in community-based CVE initiatives is stressed. Weine et al. argue that a multidisciplinary team should assess individuals at risk and arrange support and treatment. On a community level they should provide outreach and education.[43]

For increasing resilience on an individual level, Spalek and Davies present a process evaluation of a mentoring programme which was implemented in the UK for individuals considered vulnerable to different forms of violent extremism. It illustrates that a mentoring programme in CVE makes use of generic concepts such as relationship, trust, and confidentiality, but these take on a new meaning when confronted with deeply held views and very different logics, as is the case with people who hold violent extremist views. This study also highlights that political and cultural contexts should be taken into account in mentoring programmes.[44]

To increase the resilience of vulnerable groups, the quantitative effect evaluation of a Dutch resilience training called Diamant (Diamond), aimed at preventing radicalisation, provides valuable insights. The study shows that increasing empathy plays an important role in decreasing support for ideology-based violence. As such, this resilience training is considered a promising tool as a way to counter violent radicalisation, but an important disclaimer is made by the authors. It has yet to be investigated whether the Diamant training is not only effective for high-school dropouts, but is also effective in de-radicalising actual violent extremists.[45]

Schools are considered an important arena in order to increase the resilience of young people.[46] However, scholars do not agree on what the best method is to reach this goal. For example, the UK CVE educational strategy revolves around the promotion of British values, but is often critiqued. The studies of McDonald and Liht and Savage focus on increasing resilience and provide suggestions on how extremist messages should be

countered and alternatives can be promoted.[47] McDonald illustrates that we should not try to counter dichotomies such as "us" and "them" and the "West at war with Islam," but rather promote concepts of loyalty, belonging, and duty.[48] The qualitative outcome evaluation of Liht and Savage shows that such an approach can be effective. The target group of their programme has been exposed to extremist discourse. Their theory of change is based on the concept of value complexity, in which competing and even extremist values are openly discussed in terms of outcomes. The findings provide initial support that promoting value complexity is more effective than the promotion of mono-dimensional or secular values.[49] Aly et al. conducted a qualitative effect evaluation of an Australian education intervention, the Beyond Bali Education Resource. They applied the theory of moral disengagement to develop the intervention. Moral disengagement is how individuals justify violence, dehumanize victims, disregard the harmful consequences of violence, and absolve themselves of blame. The programme is specifically designed to build social cognitive resilience to violent extremism by engaging self-sanctions and preparing students to challenge the influence of violent extremism that can lead to moral disengagement. The study indicates that the programme achieved some success in building resilience by engaging participants in constructing violent extremism as unjust and inhumane; creating empathy with victims of violent extremism; developing self-efficacy in resisting violent extremism influences; and responding to influences in positive, productive ways and considering the devastating impacts of violent extremism.[50]

Most studies of the review are on community engagement and resilience, in particular studies on the negative outcomes and side effects, which claim that community engagement programmes have led to the singling out of Muslim communities, stigmatisation, polarisation, and "suspect communities."[51] Reviewing these studies, one would be inclined to think that community engagement is an ineffective CVE approach which should be abandoned. Briggs is one of the few who explains the rationale for community engagement and why it is such an important part of a CVE strategy.[52] Firstly, communities are able to act as an early warning system towards police and intelligence services. Secondly, communities are able to safeguard young people from violent extremism. Third, communities can provide interventions that tackle the real and perceived grievances of young people. And finally, engagement and consent of the community helps to prevent and overcome some of the negative side effects of harder CT measures targeted towards individuals of the community. How community engagement is done in practice is discussed by Lamb, who uses the theory of change behind community engagement, based on the concept of "three cups of tea."[53] Additionally, with case studies in three different cities and countries, Vermeulen illustrates the subtle differences of community engagement.[54] An Australian community engagement initiative with Sydney Muslims and the police was evaluated as successful. In surveys, community members indicated they considered the initiative successful as it led to direct contact, it was public, and it involved in-depth relationships and partnerships. However, the suspect community critique was also heard here.[55] So whilst most CVE community engagement programmes are criticized because Muslim communities tend to be targeted and singled out, the previously mentioned community-based Muslim-led organization WORDE is applauded. Mirahmadi explains that the success of the programme lies in the bottom-up top-down approach of the programme and diversity of the organization. Diverse faith and ethnic communities are the frontiers of the programme in which they have ownership

and shape the programme, but at the same time are supported by local government and law enforcement.[56]

Exit programmes

The studies of Horgan and Braddock and Veldhuis underline that exit programmes are a catch phrase for changing radical beliefs (de-radicalisaton), the cessation of violence (disengagement), re-integration and rehabilitation of violent extremists.[57] El Said has conducted a process evaluation of several exit programmes across the world. It provides insight into the different contexts and outcome patterns of exit: to prevent further radicalisation; rehabilitation and counselling for those who have already been radicalized (state vs. individual initiatives); and collective de-radicalisation either in or outside prison. In terms of lessons learned, the study stresses the role of popular support combined with a committed, charismatic, political leadership; the role of families and civil society; and the role and quality of the religious experts involved. The political and developmental strength of the state is also important. Finally, no single formula can deal with all cases of violent extremism, even within a single region. Counter-radicalisation and de-radicalisation efforts must be tailor made and take into account the culture, mores, traditions, history, and rules and regulations of each country.[58] The importance of context is also highlighted by Demant and De Graaf, but in a different manner. They highlight that any de-radicalisation policy run by the government should be understood and the discourse can have a profound effect on processes of de-radicalisation.[59] By drawing on Turkish case studies, Bastug and Evlek illustrate how a change in government policy (from soft measures to hard measures) can affect disengagement and de-radicalization programmes.[60]

Schuurman and Bakker provide a small-scale process evaluation looking at one specific target audience for exit: the re-integration of formerly imprisoned violent extremists. This study is specifically helpful in illustrating crucial contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of an exit programme, such as the managerial support for probation staff and good cooperation with other stakeholders such as municipalities. It also highlights that a difference of opinion between stakeholders about the programme theory ("mechanisms") can lead to different interventions, e.g., too strong on behavioural aspects (disengagement) instead of also applying cognitive interventions (de-radicalisation).[61]

Similar process evaluation studies have also been conducted by Demant et al., Bjorgo and Horgan, and Dechesne but have been combined with a theory-driven approach.[62] Bjorgo and Horgan distinguish "push" and "pull" factors for exiting violent extremist organisations. Push factors represent dissatisfaction with the group (e.g., negative experiences, loss of faith in ideology or politics, etc.). Pull factors consist of positive alternatives (e.g., longing for a normal life and family obligations). Demant et al. prefer to categorize factors leading to de-radicalisation or disengagement based on *content* instead of *direction* (push/pull). They distinguish three factors: "normative" (ideological) factors concern the failing ideology such as the realisation that the desired future is not attainable; "affective" (social) factors include discontent with the group or associated subculture; finally, "continuance" (practical) factors refer to the effect on life circumstances, such as stigmatization and external pressure and isolation. Both studies identify potential barriers to disengagement such as social psychological dependence on the group and fear of legal sanctions. Alternatively, individual decisions to disengage can be facilitated by triggering events and by significant others who discourage violence. In

short, these studies are based on empirical data of voluntary exits and provide insight into what opportunities and barriers should be taken into consideration when shaping exit programmes. Similar conclusions are also reached in the study of Ferguson.[63]

Based on interviews with former violent extremists and process evaluations of exit programmes, Demant et al. also stress the importance of a comprehensive approach to de-radicalisation and disengagement. In their opinion, right-wing exit programmes are too much focused on dealing with the practical circumstances, whereas the ideological (normative) component is neglected. Exit programmes for extremist Muslims focus too much on normative factors, by focusing on theology and overlooking affective factors. They claim that European exit programmes would benefit from a broader focus in which normative, affective, and continuance factors are dealt with in a more even and combined fashion.

Family and network support

The previously mentioned study of Weine stressed the importance of family for increasing resilience.[64] Furthermore, El Said highlighted the importance of family for de-radicalisation.[65] The study of Gielen discusses the rationale behind family support throughout the whole spectrum of CVE.[66] In its earliest stages, family support can be provided to parents of individuals at risk, by addressing their concerns and working on maintaining a positive family environment in which extremist ideas are discussed and alternatives are provided. If radical or extremist ideas lead to travel to a conflict zone abroad, such as Syria or Iraq, family support can then be aimed at maintaining contact with their children or relatives and in creating a positive environment for a child to return home. Families can be supported whilst their relative is imprisoned or afterwards in the re-integration and rehabilitation process, as families are also a crucial factor in de-radicalisation and disengagement. Moreover, family members of deceased violent extremists such as brothers, sisters, cousins, but also peers, form an at-risk group for violent extremism as they are often subject to grooming whilst in a vulnerable state. Supporting families and the broader professional network of the family (such as school teachers) should enable practitioners and family members to act upon early warning signals and prevent radicalisation of other family members or peers. Finally, deceased violent extremists cause a lot of grief, anxiety, despair, and upset. This target audience has not previously been mentioned in CVE literature.

The study of Williams and Horgan illustrates that the focus of CVE should not only be on the families, but also on the peers who seem best positioned to notice early signs of violent extremism. Furthermore, the study reveals that peers are reluctant to reach out to CVE-relevant service providers or networks (e.g., family members) because they fear potential repercussions. The study discusses opting for an evidence-based, anonymous, texting-oriented crisis hotline.[67] In the previously mentioned study by Williams et al. in which a Muslim-led CVE programme was evaluated, a "peer gatekeeper training" was also part of the programme. High school students were trained in recognizing and assisting peers who felt isolated or had experienced personal crisis or cyberbullying. The study concludes that peer gatekeepers are most likely to intervene when things get serious; thus they recommend peer gatekeeper training as part of an evidence-based CVE policy.[68] The merit of the peer method is also acknowledged by Moffet and Sgro, who describe the Peer to Peer (P2P): Challenging Extremism initiative in their study. The central idea behind the initiative is that students across the globe counter extremism among

their peers and in their communities, by designing and implementing a social or digital initiative, product, or tool targeted to empower their peers and counter hate.[69]

Counter-communication

The studies of Stevens and Neumann and Aldrich highlight that counter-communication can take on different forms such as online counter-communication or radio programming.[70] Aldrich's studies show an increased access to tolerance radio programming and civic participation, leading to more residents being critical of Al Qaeda's use of violence and motivating people to see the United States as combatting terrorism, not Islam. However, these results are very much context-dependent, for example, illustrated by different outcomes for men and women. Furthermore, the studies confirm the results of other programmes in Africa such as reconciliation, peace, and tolerance radio may not change higher-level, abstract beliefs but can alter both norms and behaviour.[71]

Stevens and Neumann illustrate that one should not only focus on the availability of online extremist content (e.g., take-down measures), but also on approaches that involve discouraging the producers of extremist materials, stimulating online communities to self-regulate, and reducing the appeal of extremist messages and promoting positive messages.[72]

Recently the counter-narrative approach has received scrutiny. Kate Ferguson argues that there is little hard evidence that causal inferences can be made that exposure to violent extremist content also leads to participation in violent extremist activities. The assumption that extremist narrative can be countered by providing an alternative or counter-narrative also remains unproven.[73] Davies et al. have examined the content of six online CVE programmes and conclude that these programmes are lacking theoretical foundations and do not address the mechanisms that underlie the radicalization process, such as contextual factors or identity issues.[74]

Discussion and conclusion

This article has explored the added value of a realistic review approach to the field of CVE. Realistic review has specifically been developed to evaluate complex social programmes, but had not yet been applied in the field of CVE. Whilst traditional reviews are often presented in a matrix with a mean size effect and a form of judgment with respect to the quality of the evaluation, the realist review method enables us to synthesize existing CVE evaluations, without attributing hierarchy to evaluation methods in the studies. This has no added value as most of the CVE studies are not comparable. Rather, the method seeks to highlight relevant contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes in order to answer the explorative question "what works, for whom, in which context, and how?"

The review highlights that CVE is an umbrella phrase for many different interventions and programmes and helps us gain a better understanding as to what CVE precisely entails. As a consequence it is impossible to develop a model with explanatory hypotheses that are middle-range and speculate on configurations between context, mechanisms and outcomes as the interventions and underlying mechanisms and contextual conditions in CVE are endless. The review also reveals that whilst CVE literature is developing rapidly, effect evaluations still remain limited. Out of the 73 found CVE studies, only 14 can be considered an effect evaluation. Most CVE studies are theory driven and policy recommendations are mostly

based on theoretical frameworks or conceptual models, rather than empirical evidence. However, the realistic review method illustrates that different forms of evaluation can contribute to a better understanding of what type of CVE measures are being used, how they work and for whom they work, and what lessons we can draw from them.

This article has aimed to deliver a contribution to the CVE domain by synthesizing the currently available literature. Policymakers and practitioners can hopefully draw from the scientific lessons we have learned so far. Scholars, in turn, can draw on the review as the lessons learned can help theory building for future evaluations. Furthermore, we can also start zooming in on specific aspects of CVE using the realist review framework as developed in this article. The realist review framework can be applied to very specific interventions or programmes. For example, increasing resilience is an important aspect of countering violent extremism that draws on different programme theories, such as the theory of moral disengagement, bonding and bridging, value complexity, etc. Future reviews could focus on one or more of these theories to develop a refined programme theory configuration on increasing resilience as part of a CVE strategy.

The review raises some points for discussion. Firstly, the review has illustrated that in the last year CVE studies and evaluations have taken flight. Fifty percent of the reviewed studies have been published in 2016 or 2017. Whilst it is very encouraging that CVE studies have increased, it also raises the question about how as a research community we can keep the realist CVE review up to date. Secondly, the final step of realist review is informing policy makers and providing them with scientific information on "what works, for whom, in which context, and how?" This requires active engagement between policy makers and scientists and requires us to think about different forms of dissemination. Can this best be done via peer-reviewed journals or should we also find more engaging and interactive forms? Finally, such engagement should contribute to an earlier and active involvement of researchers in the CVE policy domain, because we still have a long journey to go before evaluations of CVE interventions and programmes become the rule rather than the exception.

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