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Research Article

Countering Violent Extremism: Leading Practices and Emerging Insights

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Abstract

This article reviews and comments on the key practices and insights which have emerged in the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) fields. Eight themes are identified from various academic studies and practicioner reports: (1) individual resilience, (2) identity formation, (3) action and dialogue, (4) community engagement, (5) community resilience, (6) women's roles, (7) personnel's roles, and (8) former radicals. Individual resilience, comprising cognitive skills, character traits (like empathy), and values (e.g., community and tolerance), is crucial in countering extremist ideologies. Identity formation focuses on empowering minority communities while inclusive dialogue challenges extremist ideas. Community engagement bridges the gap between state institutions and communities, emphasizing cultural exchange and community organizations, whilst community resilience, the ultimate goal, depends on strong social connections within and across communities, incorporating social bonding, bridging, and linking. Additionally, personnel who are well-trained and equipped, play a pivotal role in P/CVE program success, necessitating evidence-based training and effective monitoring and evaluation. Women are vital in both preventing and participating in violent extremism, warranting inclusion in community-building efforts and last but not least, former radicals possess unique insights but require careful integration into P/CVE strategies. In summary, this paper outlines key moving parts in the P/CVE strategies, emphasizing balanced approaches, stakeholder involvement, and further research for effective P/CVE initiatives.

1. INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism poses a persistent global challenge, requiring comprehensive strategies to prevent and counter its proliferation. This paper offers a nuanced examination of the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) landscape, synthesizing key practices and insights that have surfaced from a diverse array of academic studies and practitioner reports. The multifaceted nature of P/CVE efforts is observed through identifying eight pivotal themes: individual resilience, identity formation, action and dialogue, community engagement, community resilience, women's roles, personnel's roles, and the unique perspectives of former radicals. As societies grapple with the complex challenge of violent extremism, the inquiry into existing literature and state of the art insights provides a foundation for informed and strategic interventions that go beyond traditional paradigms, fostering resilience, inclusivity, and sustainable peace within vulnerable communities.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper presents an exploratory qualitative study which uses the deductive approach to determine the landscape of the radicalization discipline through searching for themes and recognizing patters in the data constituted of over 30 papers from prevailing literature. Thematic analysis in this context also bears elements of content analysis, namely by trying to determine the presence of certain words or concepts, along with much larger and broader themes. Moreover, in spite of what the name

might suggest, exploratory research is not merely the same as examining, analyzing, or investigating something that may not be known beforehand. Rather, "the main goal of exploratory research is the production of inductively derived generalizations about the group, process, activity, or situation under study, which can be achieved through flexibility in looking for data and open-mindedness about where to find such data" (Stebbins, 2008: 328). Therefore, the point of observation presents both primary and secondary sources such as quantitative and qualitative academic works, state and non-governmental reports and evaluation and monitoring papers from the field.

3. INDIVIDUAL RESILIENCE

The concept of individual resilience within the realm of radicalization is centered on cultivating critical thinking and judgment, while concurrently reinforcing flexibility. Scholars assert a three-fold approach to enhance individuals' resilience against extremist and radical ideologies, focusing on cognitive capacity, character traits, and a robust value system (Stephens, Sieckelinck & Boutellier, 2021: 349). This paper aligns with the academic perspective that underscores the significance of individual resilience as a foundational element in preventative interventions, directly challenging the susceptibility of individuals to radical or extremist ideologies (Dzhekova et al., 2016: 94).

Cognitive resources play a pivotal role in interpreting and evaluating ideas, messages, and propaganda, with the manner of message delivery being equally crucial in countering radical ideologies on an individual level (Schmid, 2013: 231). Accordingly, interventions targeting cognitive skills aim to identify key features of extremist ideologies and cultivate a cognitive skill set that actively rejects the benefits of such ideologies (Ghosh et al., 2017: 15). For instance, challenging the black-and-white distinctions propagated by extremist perspectives by encouraging thinking with complexity and considering a spectrum of options for problem-solving is highlighted as an effective strategy (Stephens & Sieckelinck, 2020: 159). Mattsson and Saljo (2017: 117) propose an educational approach that fosters critical thinking, not dictating what to think but teaching individuals how to critically engage with ideas, thus enhancing cognitive capacity.

In addition to cognitive capacity, certain character traits, including empathy, compassion, and self-esteem, significantly contribute to an individual's resilience against violent extremism (Aly, Taylor & Karnovsky, 2014: 372). Empathy, in particular, is positioned as a strong predictor of resilience, countering the dehumanization that precedes acts of violence in the radicalization process (Feddes, Mann & Doosje, 2015: 415). High levels of empathy not only discourage radical thinking on an emotional level but also contribute to a greater emotional intelligence that challenges extremist ideologies on an ideological level (Miller, 2014: 186). Furthermore, maintaining a reasonably high self-esteem acts as a protective factor, deterring individuals from gravitating towards radical organizations seeking a sense of worth, purpose, and community (Davydov, 2015: 151).

Values, as a distinct element, are considered instrumental in fostering resilience against extremist ideologies, offering a foundation for community-building on a broader scale (Liht & Savage, 2013: 51). Unlike personal traits, values are more easily promoted and transferred between individuals, creating a solid basis for community resilience. Values such as community and tolerance, advocated by various authors, play a pivotal role in this context (MacNair and Frank, 2017; Davydov, 2015; Thomas, 2016). Community, as a value, encompasses human rights, citizenship, active civil society, and inclusion, with education playing a paramount role in communicating and transmitting these values. A strong framework of values built on human rights and citizenship complements critical and complex thinking, fortifying resilience against extremism and fostering a sense of internalized commitment to these values (Stephens, 2020: 293). In summary, the interconnected elements of cognitive capacity, character traits, and values collectively contribute to building individual resilience and formulating a robust foundation for preventative measures against violent extremism.

4. IDENTITY FORMATION

The identity theme primarily revolves around fortifying and affirming identities, with a specific focus on safeguarding those belonging to minority communities. Frequently, discussions related to radicalization and violent extremism (VE) inadvertently perpetuate stigmas and prejudices against these minority communities, contributing to a discourse where the communities being discussed have limited participation (McDonald & Mir, 2011: 36). This critique extends to the broader

public discourse on radicalization, particularly evident in the European Union (EU) context, where Muslim minorities often find themselves at the forefront of such discussions. Akram and Richardson (2009: 44-47) argue that providing a platform for ethnic and religious minorities to voice their perspectives and emphasizing inclusion in social and political processes are essential preventive measures.

Similar sentiments are echoed by McDonald and Mir (2011, p. 39), who highlight the tension experienced by Muslims in Europe as they navigate multiple identities. The challenge of reconciling being both Muslim and British exemplifies the complexity of identity (Taylor & Soni, 2017: 249). Hence, efforts should be directed towards reassuring individuals about their identity, emphasizing their place in the communities they belong to. It is crucial, especially for younger individuals, to avoid the need to sacrifice or suppress aspects of their identity to fit in (Quartermaine, 2016: 21-24). In this regard, schooling emerges as a central player in cultivating a sense of belonging often lacking in the lives of adult minorities.

5. DIALOGUE

Dialogue stands out as a potent and promising tool for countering extremist ideologies, contributing across various aspects of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), including prevention, de-radicalization, and disengagement (Ellis & Abdi, 2017: 79). Characterized by frankness, honesty, and a non-judgmental atmosphere, effective dialogue relies on and reinforces critical thought (Ellis & Abdi, 2017: 79). Establishing a "safe space" is imperative for meaningful discussions, allowing individuals to explore ideas without fear (Huq, 2017: 1042). Importantly, dialogue involves not only communication between identities but also the deconstruction and examination of ideas on their merit (Stephens & Sieckelinck, 2020: 149). Allowing diverse perspectives to share a level playing field enhances the effectiveness of dialogues.

In the context of CVE, it is suggested that openly airing even the most radical views can defuse their power if participants are willing to discuss, question, and explore ideas while minimizing biases (Taylor & Karnovsky, 2014: 134). Another dimension of dialogue involves channeling frustrations and grievances over power institutions and the existing social order, necessitating a similar need for non-judgment, honesty, and safety (Cherney & Murphy, 2017: 1029). Challenging frustrations through political discourse and public participation can reduce the space for violent views or actions as means of addressing political grievances (Taylor et al., 2017: 189).

Expanding on the dialogue framework, some authors view dialogue as either complementing or continuing through engagement in action (Aly, Taylor & Karnovsky, 2014: 376). Political action may manifest as political protests or involvement in political organizations, serving as an extension of expressed frustrations in political discourse. On the other hand, civic engagement focuses on enhancing individuals' sense of agency through voluntary activities, such as constructing parks, caring for the homeless and elderly, fostering a connection to communities, and promoting a sense of importance in the process (Cherney & Hartley, 2017: 1033-1035). Inclusion and affirmation emerge as underlying themes in the prevention paradigm, linking increased moral and physical agency through voluntary action to a sense of belonging and importance within communities (Stephens et al., 2021: 359).

6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

At the heart of the concept of community engagement in the context of preventing radicalization is the reduction of the gap between state institutions and communities. Embracing the notion of engagement, this process endeavors to establish connections and reinforce relationships between citizens and the state, primarily in the form of institutions with which community members interact (Murray, Mueller-Johnson & Sherman, 2015: 73). Law enforcement organizations, tasked with policing and securing communities, hold particular significance in this context, as their duties often come with the potential costs of alienation and prejudice. The literature advocates for activities fostering closer interactions between community members and law enforcement, emphasizing profound cultural exchange and understanding, including direct engagement with radical or non-mainstream views at the grassroots level (Ellis & Abdi, 2017: 79).

However, achieving the goal of strengthening relationships between state institutions and communities may prove overly ambitious without the involvement of community organizations. These organizations possess legitimacy and authority within communities, providing invaluable insights to state representatives (Briggs, 2010: 975). Relationships mediated and, in some instances, led by such organizations are more likely to be authentic and meaningful, in contrast to superficial and symbolic connections (Briggs, 2010: 976). The state, both theoretically and practically, cannot fully replicate the work undertaken by community organizations. It is essential for state institutions to engage experientially and, concurrently, to collaborate with these organizations effectively in order to engage at-risk communities most efficiently (Briggs, 2010: 976).

7. COMMUNITY RESLIENCE

Ultimately, both state and non-governmental endeavors should contribute to enhancing the resilience of communities, with the expectation that community strength, cohesion, and self-sufficiency extend beyond their interactions with state institutions (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Schack, 2016: 798). Resilient communities, in the context of extremism, are expected to possess the capacity to address crises independently, minimizing the need for external intervention (Ellis & Abdi, 2017: 98). The literature underlines the importance of community unity, emphasizing the quality of relationships and the nature of social connections as key components of resilience (Davidson et al., 2016: 54). Ellis and Abdi (2017: 97-99) outline a comprehensive model for building community resilience, emphasizing social bonding within the community, social bridging across different communities, and social linking to strengthen the relationship between state institutions and communities (Stephens et al., 2021: 352).

However, critics highlight the challenges associated with resilience-based narratives, pointing to the ambiguity of resilience and the problematic nature of prioritizing it as a main attribute for individuals and communities. Resilience is often perceived as the ability to bounce back from challenges, yet some authors argue for a more positive transformation and adaptation during crises, where challenges strengthen and develop aspects of the community (Altermark & Nilsson, 2018: 57). Stephens, Sieckelinck & Boutellier (2021: 348) caution against placing excessive emphasis on individual or community resilience based solely on individual characteristics, as it may imply that radicalization is solely a matter of personal responsibility, neglecting systemic and institutional factors. Conversely, viewing radicalization primarily as a result of macro injustices suggests a predominant political responsibility. Hence, the concept of resilience should be approached with care, clarifying who should be resilient to what, how, and why. Otherwise, resilience, particularly when applied loosely to individuals and communities, may serve as a rhetorical device that shifts focus from one stakeholder to another, potentially relieving their responsibility in the issue (Stephens et al., 2019: 354).

8. THE ROLE OF PERSONNEL

Having established the conceptual challenges of countering radicalization, the success of any Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) program is undeniably contingent on the quality of its personnel. The EU's Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) emphasizes the indispensable nature of personnel training in countering violent extremism (RAN, 2019: 269). Given the high-risk nature of P/CVE activities, characterized by interventions with volatile subjects and the potential for strategic or operational mistakes to contribute to further radicalization, the significance of evidence-based training strategies and curriculum with solid academic and practical foundations cannot be overstated.

Koehler and Fiebig (2019: 47) underscore the consensus on the importance of personnel training but note a prevalent focus on selecting qualified personnel with relevant experience rather than prioritizing the actual training course and curriculum. This approach is problematic as experience and qualifications lack universal applicability, leading to varied personnel across different contexts. Conversely, a well-structured training program based on empirical evidence and academic insights could ensure more consistent quality across P/CVE program staff. Despite this, Koehler and Fiebig (2019: 49) find that the average P/CVE training course lasts 8.2 days and provides limited general knowledge and awareness. Even the most extensive 24-day course is deemed insufficient to prepare practitioners for real-life challenges in interacting with vulnerable and radicalized individuals (Koehler

& Fiebig, 2019: 52-53). The study identifies a significant gap between training courses and evidence-based academic literature, emphasizing the urgent need for more extensive and better-structured training to enhance the effectiveness of P/CVE efforts.

A robust P/CVE initiative should not merely emphasize the importance of personnel and training through rhetoric but demonstrate commitment by drawing from state-of-the-art evidence and insights to create a comprehensive and highly structured training program. Effective training is pivotal not only for countering radicalization threats but also for accurately assessing the effectiveness of interventions. Monitoring and evaluation pose challenges in P/CVE efforts globally, seeking to establish a causal link between concrete interventions and the complex process of personal change and decision-making. Well-trained personnel serve as effective tools for observing and accounting for changes individuals may experience during and after interventions. Evidence-based practice minimizes arbitrary variables, providing a clearer understanding of cause and effect between interventions and outcomes, thereby contributing to more efficient and directed P/CVE initiatives (Koehler & Fiebig, 2019: 53). While it cannot replace larger-scale systematic evaluations of long-term effectiveness, evidence-based training significantly reduces immediate blind spots and enhances the overall efficacy of P/CVE programs.

9. THE ROLE OF WOMEN

The historical involvement of women in Violent Extremism (VE) is extensive and diverse, constituting a distinct avenue of research within the evolving field of radicalization. This research encompasses perspectives from human security, conflict studies, gender studies, and identity studies (Patel, 2017: 4-5). Women's roles in VE have ranged from passive supporters to active combatants, contingent on the specific context and nature of the VE under consideration. In the European Union (EU), the focus on female involvement in VE has intensified, particularly concerning radical Islam and religious extremism, following the military dismantling of the Islamic State (IS) in 2017. The unexpected migration of Western women to IS-held territories or other parts of the Middle East has prompted increased attention to understanding and addressing the role of women in VE, emphasizing the need for diverse perspectives and backgrounds of women in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) policies (Patel & Westermann, 2018: 81).

An essential insight is that women constitute a heterogeneous group, and discussions regarding their roles require careful consideration due to the inability to generalize across various communities and contexts. The literature approaches women's involvement from three predominant angles: as perpetrators, preventers, or victims of extremist violence.

Regarding motivation for joining extremist movements, women are driven by similar personal and social factors as men, although their commitment to the cause differs behaviorally once radicalized cognitively. Women often assume roles as supporters, recruiters, and facilitators, engaging in organizing logistics and human resources behind acts of violence. This multifaceted involvement poses challenges for security agencies, as women can simultaneously fulfill non-radical responsibilities such as work, parenthood, and community membership while supporting extremist organizations (Patel, 2017: 4-5).

Despite these challenges, women present opportunities as potential preventers of radicalization and terrorism. Henty and Eggleston (2018) emphasize the positive role women can play in P/CVE efforts, particularly as mothers, mediators, and contributors to prevention, reconstruction, and peacebuilding processes (Henty & Eggleston, 2018: 113-115). Actively engaging women in community-building processes beyond their traditional roles at home, including community organization, inclusion, integration, education, community service, and volunteering, is crucial for leveraging their potential. Additionally, providing platforms and opportunities for successful women to support those vulnerable to extremist threats, and employing former radicals as mentors to deliver counter-narratives, are suggested strategies to harness the potential of women in P/CVE efforts (Patel, 2017: 5; Petel & Westermann, 2018: 63).

In summary, women possess significant potential in aiding P/CVE efforts, and their roles should be explored and emphasized more actively in prevention and countering efforts, moving beyond the traditional focus on them as victims or perpetrators of VE.

10. THE ROLE OF FORMER RADICALS

Former radicals and individuals with a history in violent extremist groups, referred to as formers, have gained increased attention in recent years, sparking academic and political debates regarding their potential role within Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) strategies. Traditionally viewed as a problem rather than a solution, case studies highlighting their value in peacebuilding efforts have prompted discussions about their broader applicability in P/CVE strategies (Tapley & Clubb, 2019: 31).

Formers possess a unique set of characteristics derived from firsthand experiences and experiential knowledge of extremist movements they have disengaged from. Theoretically, they can contribute to P/CVE efforts by providing intelligence, developing and delivering counter-narratives, and engaging in peacebuilding activities, acting as gatekeepers to communities with weak state influence (Tapley & Clubb, 2019: 34). Their potential role extends to mobilizing human resources and aiding in community building and engagement, making them valuable assets across various stages of P/CVE activities, from early detection and prevention to de-radicalization and exit programs.

However, challenges and uncertainties associated with former radicals and combatants have led to hesitations among policymakers regarding their significant role in P/CVE efforts. Assessing the level of deradicalization and disengagement proves difficult, and reservations arise from the contextual variations in violent extremism (VE) types, such as secular nationalist radicalism versus religious extremism in the EU. Moreover, the recruitment of qualified formers is limited to personal will, with individual qualities like charisma and emotional intelligence playing crucial roles (Tapley & Clubb, 2019: 35-36).

Despite the evident interest in the role of formers, operationalization remains a challenge. While literature has addressed why formers merit policymakers' attention and how they can contribute to P/CVE efforts, the practical aspects of recruiting, selecting, training, overseeing, and monitoring formers for effective application are yet to be fully answered. As case studies from diverse contexts accumulate, policymakers are anticipated to place greater emphasis on the value formers bring and explore concrete positions for their application at various stages during interventions.

11. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) landscape demands a holistic approach. Key themes—individual resilience, identity formation, dialogue, community engagement, community resilience, personnel's roles, women's roles, and former radicals' perspectives—offer practical implications for strategic interventions.

Individual resilience, cultivated through critical thinking and character traits, is foundational. Identity formation, especially for minority communities, counters stigmas that fuel radicalization. Dialogue proves potent in challenging extremist ideologies and bridging communities with state institutions. Community engagement aims to reduce the gap between institutions and communities, emphasizing collaboration with community organizations. Building resilient communities involves strengthening relationships, social bonding, bridging across communities, and linking with state institutions. Personnel training is indispensable, requiring evidence-based strategies for effective P/CVE initiatives. Women's roles extend beyond traditional perceptions, recognizing their potential as preventers and positive influencers in communities. Former radicals possess unique insights, with potential contributions to intelligence, counter-narratives, and peacebuilding activities, warranting further exploration and operationalization. In essence, this synthesis provides a foundation for nuanced, evidence-based P/CVE interventions. Stakeholders must collaborate for context-specific initiatives, refining approaches for global peace and security.

12. CONCLUSION

Addressing radicalization and violent extremism necessitates evidence-based research into individual, contextual, and structural factors influencing human actions and responses. Violent extremism lacks a singular catalyst, but recurring drivers can lead to radicalization. Many of these drivers have behavioral roots, requiring targeted interventions such as education, youth empowerment, and community engagement. The utilization of behavioral insights empowers policymakers and practitioners to pinpoint risk factors and formulate validated strategies for effectively preventing and

countering violent extremism. The behavioral insights, along with structural and more holistic frameworks, facilitates the identification of both risk and resilience factors, allowing the development of empirically validated interventions. This should serve as a central driver for policymakers and practitioners to proficiently prevent and counter violent extremism. However, bridging the gap between theory and practice remains of paramount importance and contextualizing central insights from the discipline also aims to serve as a catalyst for increased congruence between policy making and academic endevours.

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