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### Cutting through complexity

*Evaluating countering violent extremism (CVE)*

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#### Publication date

2020

#### Document Version

Other version

#### License

Other

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#### Citation for published version (APA):

Gielen, A.-J.E. (2020). *Cutting through complexity: Evaluating countering violent extremism (CVE)*.

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## 7 Conclusion

### 7.1 Recap

When friends and relatives ask me what my PhD research is about, I usually answer in layperson terms, that I am studying the effectiveness of countering violent extremism (CVE). The immediate response is then generally, “So, does CVE work?” Unfortunately, I have to disappoint those people, and any readers, who were hoping to get a quick answer to that question. Quite simply, we as a scientific community are unable to answer the question of ‘what works in CVE’. CVE is a relatively new and very complex phenomenon. The term itself has become a – contested – catch phrase for a broad array of interventions targeting different populations at different stages in the radicalization process. Most common evaluation methods have proven unsuitable for dealing with the complexity of CVE. As a result, there is a serious lack of evaluations in the field. Those few evaluations that we can draw upon are very heterogeneous, both in terms of evaluation method and the type of interventions that they address. It is therefore impossible to make any grounded statements on the effectiveness of CVE. Academia thus has little theoretical basis for adequately advising the policy and practitioner community on the best course of action.

Moreover, the question of ‘what works’ is too simplistic. The wicked nature of radicalization and violent extremism requires an evaluation method that un.masks too simple problem-solution couplings, looks at the (normative) assumptions underlying CVE interventions and takes the highly contextual nature of (countering) radicalization and violent extremism into account. The field faces a twofold lacuna: (i) we are in need of an evaluation method that can accommodate the complexity and contextuality of CVE, while providing an authoritative basis for new evaluations and at the same time exposing incorrect or too limited, normative assumptions in CVE policy; (ii) we require a ‘meta-analysis’ method for synthesizing the variety of evaluations available to produce generic insights. Addressing precisely these issues, realistic evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) and the associated method of meta-analysis, or ‘realist review’(Pawson, 2006), could offer a very relevant and valuable path forward.

The premise of the realistic evaluation method is that evaluation must take into account the contextual conditions and mechanisms that underlie

interventions. As a consequence ‘does CVE work?’ is not the right question to ask. Rather, the question we need to pose is ‘what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances in CVE’. Until now, realistic evaluation had never before been applied to CVE.<sup>20</sup> However, the realistic evaluation method did appear to be a promising heuristic evaluation model to apply to CVE, because of its ability to take into account the contextuality and (normative) assumptions that underlie this wicked and contested problem. While realistic evaluation offers guidelines on how to use theory to deductively develop a theoretical model in situations where theories and evidence are abundant, it provides no detailed guidelines on how to develop a testable theoretical model in situations where theories and evidence are lacking. Pawson and Tilley (1997) claim that in those situations, what they call ‘folk theories’ can provide valuable insight into relevant C-M-Os. However, as discussed in chapter 1, they offered little guidance on how, for example, policy documents and expert opinion, might be used to develop a theory. This aspect of the realistic evaluation method thus required further development.

Realist review, which synthesizes *existing* evaluation studies, had also never been applied to CVE. Realist review is a method for synthesizing evaluations of complex social interventions, even in fields that are lacking in evaluation studies. This suggests its potential for use in the field of CVE. Yet, Pawson (2005) indicated that the realist review method would require adaptation and innovation for application to a widening range of complex programmes (Pawson, 2006: 93–96, in Pawson & Manzano-Santaella, 2012). This need for further development of the realist review method to accommodate a widening array of complex programmes was also pointed out by Betts (2013). Her realist review of aid effectiveness and governance for developing country reform concluded that broad and diverse programmes and interventions require a more systematic approach for data extraction than provided in Pawson and Tilley’s work (*ibid.*). It seems plausible that in principle, realist review could provide a suitable method for synthesizing the limited CVE evaluation literature, contributing in turn to theory building. It is however, likely that the review method would need adaptation to be applied to CVE.

In sum, realistic evaluation seems a good candidate for meeting the need for more and better evaluation of CVE programmes, as it could address the inherent complexity of these programmes. However, realistic evaluation

20 With the exception of Veldhuis (2012) who applied the first step of the realistic evaluation method for *design* of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for violent extremists.

has hitherto hardly been applied to CVE. Could it be developed into a suitable method, and what adaptation will be required to that end? Also, to what extent and how might it help us gain a better understanding of CVE, contributing to building a theoretical foundation upon which the research community can base its policy recommendations?

This question led to the central focus of this dissertation:

*How can realist review and realistic evaluation be employed and developed in the field of countering violent extremism (CVE), and what can realist review and realistic evaluation contribute to the development of CVE policy and to deepening our understanding of violent extremism?*

These questions formed the starting point of this dissertation research and are addressed in this final chapter.

## 7.2 Realist review

As pointed out, realist review is a method for meta-analysis; that is, for synthesizing *existing* evaluation studies rather than for evaluation of single interventions. While traditional reviews often present a matrix of mean effect sizes alongside a form of judgement with respect to the quality of the evaluations identified, the realist review method enables us to synthesize existing CVE evaluations without attributing a hierarchy to the evaluation methods used in the studies examined (Pawson, 2006; Gielen, 2017a). In short, realist review does not favour one evaluation method over others. Its premise is that each CVE evaluation contains valuable insights into relevant contexts and mechanisms, which helps us to answer the explorative question ‘what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances’. Also, realist review does not provide an overall judgement on the effect of an intervention. Instead, it yields insights into the variety of ways in which interventions might, in a particular context, trigger mechanisms that generate outcomes. These insights can also contribute to theory building, not only regarding an intervention or programme, but also on the phenomenon that the programme or intervention aims to address. This is an opportunity not hitherto noted in the literature on realist review.

Although realist review has been designated in terms of six steps (clarifying the scope of the review, searching for primary studies, appraising quality,

extracting the data, synthesizing the data and disseminating the findings, Pawson, 2006; Gielen, 2017a), due to the realist and iterative nature of the review process, there can be no generic technical manual on how to conduct realist review. Though the realist principles should always be followed, Pawson and Manzano-Santaella (2012) observed that very few reviews labelled realist actually abide by the realist principles, and that the conclusions and recommendations they report might therefore be misleading.

Drawing on the work of Pawson and realist colleagues and fellows, this dissertation has presented heuristic guidelines on how to conduct realist review for complex social programmes and has further explored these by actually applying them to CVE. These heuristic guidelines were then applied to the field of CVE. Chapter 2 presented a realist review of *existing* CVE evaluations, providing a better understanding of what CVE is and dos and don'ts for CVE policymakers and practitioners. Chapter 3 presented methodological reflections, focusing not on the *outcome* of a realist review of CVE measures but rather on the steps toward it and the challenges that arise when applying the method of realist review to a field as complex as CVE.

The realist review of CVE evaluation studies presented in chapter 2 demonstrates the heterogeneous nature of the interventions that fall under the catch phrase 'CVE'. The review confirms that the heuristic guidelines for realist review may require adaption for situations in which (i) the presence of a complex and wicked problem and its contingent solutions imply a nearly endless set of C-M-O configurations; (ii) evaluations are lacking; (iii) heterogeneous primary studies make it impossible to draw out dominant theories and compare; (iv) a more systematic approach is required for data extraction; and (v) the realist review method is novel in the specific field and thus requires much more explanation.

The adapted guidelines were presented in detail in table 3.3 in chapter 3, but the primary adaptations can be summarized as follows:

- The focus of the review should be on getting a better sense of what the wicked and complex issue entails. The research questions then still have an explanatory focus, but are geared toward drawing out relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes instead of testing and comparing different theories.
- With a highly complex problem like CVE, the scoping phase is used as an opportunity to conceptually grasp the issue instead of to draw out programme theories. The results of this scoping phase are relevant to

the search for primary studies as they provide insight into what search words should be used.

- Developing a theoretical model for what works, for whom, how and in what context is an end result of the review instead of the starting point.
- Primary studies should not be judged in terms of how much they contribute to a specific explanatory challenge, but rather if they provide insight into what the complex programme entails and specifically what relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes are related to the complex programme.
- If evaluations (primary studies) are lacking, inclusion criteria should be less strict. Besides qualitative and/or quantitative studies, process evaluations and theory-driven studies should also be included.
- Part of the essence of realist review is that it is not replicable. Rather, it is an interactive and iterative process that requires researchers to leave an interpretive trail. However, wicked problems such as CVE require a more systematic approach to analysing and synthesizing primary studies which focuses on what exactly is considered CVE and what its relevant contexts, mechanisms, outcomes and lessons learnt are.
- The continuous development of a field as complex as CVE means that a realist review is never finished. Rather, it is a contribution to systematic knowledge accumulation on the topic and can be used in evidence-based policy theory as an input for future reviews and evaluations.

### 7.3 Realistic evaluation

Realistic evaluation is particularly helpful for examining specific interventions within CVE, such as family support programmes, resilience programmes for youths in schools and exit programmes for foreign fighters. Realistic evaluation follows four basic steps in developing hypotheses on relevant contextual conditions (C) and mechanisms (M), which may in turn contribute to effective outcomes (O) patterns. Step 1, thus, is hypothesizing on what might work, for whom, how and in what circumstances. By drawing on multi-method data collection (step 2), relevant context-mechanism-outcome patterns can be derived and analysed (step 3). The end result is a more refined theoretical model (step 4) on what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

So the crucial first step of realistic evaluation is to develop hypotheses on what might work, for whom, how and in what circumstances. This is

generally done by drawing on an existing, and sometimes extensive, body of literature. However, how does one undertake such an exercise in a field that is lacking in evaluations and thus theory? Pawson and Tilley (1997: 88) provided an alternative for such cases in the form of 'folk theories'. As I observed in chapter 3, folk theories might be better labelled as 'policy theory' (Hoogerwerf, 1990; Bressers & Hoogerwerf, 1995) or as a 'theory of change' (Weiss, 1995). Policy theories are distinguished from social scientific theories in that these latter are designed to explain and provide generally applicable statements about human behaviour. Policy theories do not intend to explain, but seek merely to support certain (proposed) courses of action, to legitimize policy (Hoogerwerf, 1990). The departure of European fighters to join ISIS and other extremist groups in Syria and Iraq made it crucial for governments to respond. However, policymakers and practitioners could not, and still cannot, turn to science for answers, as there is very limited scientific theory on effective CVE interventions. As a consequence they developed their own theories, based on their own reflections, experience and knowledge regarding CVE; in other words, 'policy theories'. These policy theories reflect ideas about what it is in specific interventions that might generate change in people vulnerable to radicalization (mechanisms) and views on for whom, by whom and in what kinds of circumstances an intervention might be a success (contexts). These, combined, lead to outcome patterns. Ultimately, the combined contexts and mechanisms should lead to the prevention or countering of violent extremism.

Although Pawson & Tilley (1997) suggested that policy theories can be used to develop hypotheses as the first step of realistic evaluation, they shed no light on how precisely this should be undertaken. Where does one find these folk theories? How can one transform these theories into hypotheses on how relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes interact (C-M-O configurations) in order to conduct an evaluation that abides by the realistic principles?

These questions were discussed in chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 used the CVE intervention of 'family support' as a case study. Family support, in which counselling is provided to families of (potential) violent extremists, was first introduced in Germany over a decade ago, and in recent years has been adopted by countries, cities and communities from France to the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and Austria. However, different countries, cities and communities have chosen an approach that matches their own specific context. This has led to various forms of family support

across Europe. As family support is such a new intervention under the CVE umbrella, no scientific theory was available for developing preliminary C-M-O configurations that could be used for the first step of realistic evaluation. But the rapid development of family support programmes and telephone hotlines across Europe has produced an abundance of policy theories. These policy theories were found in policy documents underlying the family support programmes and also via expert opinions of practitioners who were already providing family support and whom exchanged their methods, insights and lessons learnt in European networks such as the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). These sources helped provide a better understanding of what CVE entails at the policy and practitioner levels, while also helping us to extract relevant context, mechanism and outcome patterns. By drawing on these policy theories, and further informed by my own experiences, reflections and knowledge as an intervention provider to families of foreign fighters, I was able to develop preliminary C-M-O configurations for family support programmes. These configurations addressed the different contexts and requirements for family support: Who provides family support? In what settings is this done? To what type of families is support provided? What interventions are used, and on what theories are they based? When are they successful? What types of outcome patterns should family support produce? The end result of this exercise was C-M-O configurations that could be tested using realistic evaluation, which may prove them wrong or right, or lead to their adaptation. This building of an exemplary body of scientific knowledge could be partly based on the realistic approach to evaluation.

In chapter 5, I developed a proposal for how to conduct realistic evaluation of exit programmes for female jihadists. Female violent extremism is not a new phenomenon. However, CVE interventions specifically targeted at women are novel. As a consequence, and like family support programmes, there are no evaluations of exit programmes for females that we can draw upon, which is a necessary first step in realistic evaluation. Indeed, realistic evaluation requires formulation of a hypothetical middle-range theory on what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances in exit programmes for female jihadists.

Chapter 5 illustrated how realistic evaluation could be used to overcome the lack of scientific theory on exit programmes for females. The chapter differed from chapter 4 in two key aspects. First, it drew on scientific theory, in addition to the policy theories available via documents and my own experiences



as an exit support intervention provider to girls who had attempted to travel to Syria. While there may be no scientific literature on exit programmes for females, there is literature available on female violent extremism, on processes of deradicalization and disengagement and on exit programmes. Thus, in order to formulate hypotheses on C-M-O configurations, we could draw not only on scientific theory and policy theory on female extremism, but also on that pertaining to exit programmes in general and exit policy documents in a specific country or city under review. Second, chapter 5 went beyond the first step of realistic evaluation, to illustrate how each step of realistic evaluation should be conducted. This case illustrated the type of multi-method data collection that can be applied, discerning different patterns of contextual conditions, mechanisms and outcomes relevant to the analysis of the collected data in relation to the case presented. The end result was a step-by-step approach that researchers and policymakers can draw upon to evaluate exit programmes.

#### 7.4 Realistic policy design

Chapters 2 through 5 demonstrated that realist review and realistic evaluation are suitable methods for dealing with the complexity of evaluating countering violent extremism. The focus of these chapters was on how to shape and perform realistic evaluation in an ex post situation. Chapter 1 introduced violent extremism as a complex and intractable policy issue in which different actors hold different views and belief systems on how to solve the problem. Combined with the very scant evidence base available in the CVE field, this poses challenges not only for policy evaluation, but also for *policy design*. After all, the different actors hold different views on the relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcome measures. This is a challenge not only in an ex post situation in which CVE policy has already been implemented and requires evaluation, but also in the first stage of the policy cycle, the policy design phase. Ultimately the goal of both realist review and realistic evaluation is to inform policymakers on what works, for whom, in which context, how and why, in order to help policymakers to improve their (CVE) programmes and interventions. This raises the question of if and how the realist review and the realistic evaluation method can also be applied ex ante, in order to develop a more evidence-based and informed CVE policy theory and design. These questions lay at the heart of chapter 6.

Ex ante evaluation had not yet been applied to CVE interventions and programmes – let alone ex ante realist review and realistic evaluation. Chapter 6 produced a method and heuristic guidelines relevant not only to support programmes for families of foreign fighters, but which can also be applied to other CVE interventions that need to be designed and for which an evidence base is lacking. The design of CVE interventions by drawing on realist ex ante evaluation should consist of the following steps:

- 1) Conduct a realist review of a similar intervention applied in (a) different field(s) applying the heuristic guidelines as developed in chapter 3. The end result is an unconfigured C-M-O model of an intervention or programme in a different context.
- 2) Use the outcome of the realist review as an evidence-based theoretical model to test the applicability of the C-M-O model for a CVE context and the target audience of the CVE intervention.
- 3) Conduct a stakeholder analysis. Which people and organizations would be involved and or affected by the CVE intervention? That is, who would be the target group of the intervention? In which municipalities? Which communities and expert organizations would be involved?
- 4) Use the stakeholder analysis as an input for the selection of multi-method data collection to test and further enhance and specify the contexts, mechanisms and outcomes developed in step 1, for example, by conducting interviews and focus groups with relevant stakeholders.
- 5) Analyse the data in terms of relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes. Does the data warrant further specification of or additions to the model as developed in step 1?
- 6) Develop a specified C-M-O model related to the CVE intervention and target audience that provides answers to questions such as the following:
  - a. If such an intervention were implemented, which contextual conditions would need to be met?
  - b. What mechanisms underlie the specific intervention?
  - c. What are the potential outcomes of the intervention?

Realist review applied ex ante contributes to the development of an evidence-based policy theory. Realistic evaluation tests the applicability of a policy theory in the context of CVE and its target audiences. It provides communities, families and/or individuals opportunities to voice their opinions and express their wishes regarding CVE. It also includes the most important stakeholders that are influenced or affected by the CVE intervention or programme. Thus, a realistic ex ante evaluation approach will contribute to the legitimacy, feasibility and effectiveness of CVE policy. It also creates

the conditions for more thorough evaluation research, which in turn can contribute to a more evidence-based CVE.

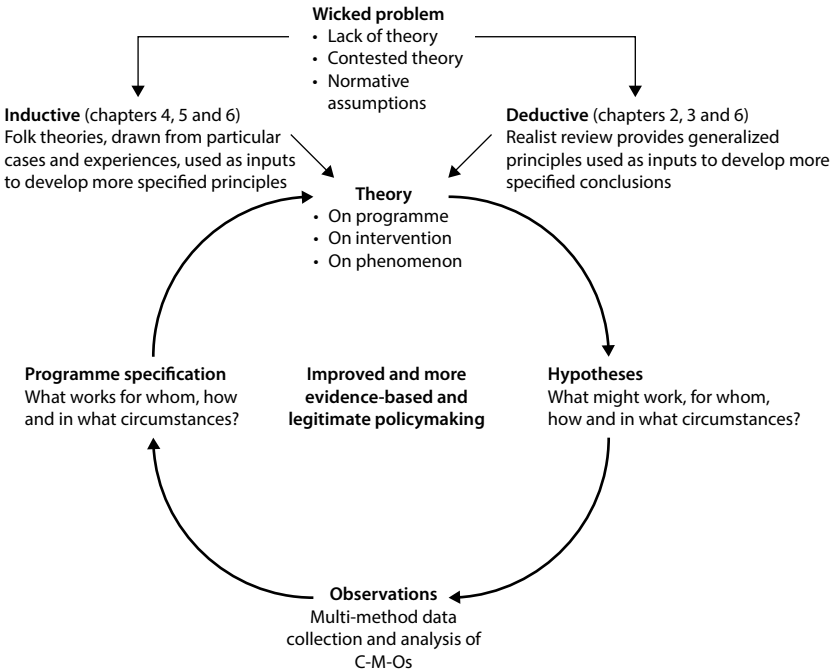
## 7.5 Methodological contribution

In sum, realistic evaluation and review were developed to provide an evaluation and synthesis method for complex social programmes. While these methods have become established in the healthcare sector (Manzano *et al.*, 2015) they are less common in the social domain and had never before been applied to CVE. In taking a field as complex as CVE as a case study for realistic evaluation and review, this research has essentially provided a guide to conducting realistic evaluation and review in complex social fields that are still emerging and developing, are lacking in scientific theory and have only limited and heterogeneous studies to draw on. For these situations, the current study provides guidance on the following:

- how to make use of folk theories when scientific theory is lacking;
- how to develop hypothetical C-M-O configurations;
- how to collect relevant data and analyse it in a realist fashion;
- how to synthesize limited and heterogeneous evaluation studies in a field that is still developing;
- how to design effective, feasible and legitimate CVE interventions by applying *ex ante* realist review and realistic evaluation.

The methodological contribution of my dissertation research is depicted in figure 7.1. The figure shows that wicked problems such as CVE are more difficult to evaluate, which often leads to a lack of theory. A lack of theory is problematic because theory is not only quintessential for further evaluation, it is also vital for informed policymaking. Thus, other forms of theory development are required. This dissertation presented and developed two options. One is to apply ‘folk theory’ in situations where evidence is lacking. Folk theories, such as expert opinion, participant observation and policy documents, make it possible to inductively develop theory as they provide insight into the CVE programme or intervention; the type of service provider and his/her requirements; specific contextual conditions; the methods used and theories these are based upon; indicators of success; and the types of outcome patterns that should (or should not) be produced. Thus, taking specified instances as a starting point for evaluation, from which hypotheses on relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes are

**Figure 7.1: The methodological contribution of my dissertation: A further development of the realistic evaluation cycle (Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 85). In this dissertation I developed heuristic guidelines for realistic review and evaluation, which enable us to inductively and deductively develop theory in order to evaluate complex social programmes and ultimately contribute to more informed policymaking.**



developed, can produce more specified principles. This approach was applied in chapters 4 and 6 of this dissertation. Alternatively, realist review makes it possible to develop theory by drawing on generalized principles, using a realist meta-analysis with the heuristic guidelines developed in table 3.3 of chapter 3, as an input for more specified conclusions. This approach was applied in chapters 2 and 6.

This inductively and deductively developed theory then makes it possible not only to gain more specific insights into how CVE works, but also to better understand the phenomenon of violent extremism itself. This was explored in chapters 5 and 6 and is summarized in section 7.5 below. Ultimately, these programme specifications and theory development also make it possible to design more evidence-based and legitimate policy.

## 7.6 Contributing to the CVE policy and scientific community

While heuristic development of the realistic evaluation method comprised an important part of this research, the current study was not strictly methodological in nature. It aimed, rather, also to deliver a contribution to the CVE policy and practitioner arena by synthesizing the literature currently available via a realist review and developing hypotheses on what works, for whom, how and why in family support and in exit programmes. The review and evaluations will serve both the policy and the practitioner communities, as well as the scientific community. They provide policymakers and scientists a better understanding of relevant contexts and mechanisms in CVE, which will help policymakers further develop their CVE programmes. This will help the scientific community advance toward a better understanding of the programmes and initiatives under the CVE umbrella, alongside contexts and mechanisms that can be employed in future (evaluation) research. The most important lessons learnt are summarized below:

- Chapter 2 found that CVE consists of many different types of interventions that can be offered to different target audiences at different stages. These are best captured using the classification system of primary prevention, secondary prevention and tertiary prevention (see figure 2.1). Both the scientific and policy community must realize that CVE is more than preventative work or deradicalization and disengagement alone.
- Chapter 2 also demonstrated that ‘increasing resilience’ plays an important role in CVE programmes, as greater resilience enhances protective factors and can thus prevent (further) radicalization. Interventions to increase resilience can be offered to different target audiences, such as vulnerable individuals, vulnerable groups and (diaspora) communities (Weine, 2012; Gielen, 2017a). Mentoring, community outreach and education are commonly used to improve resilience. These efforts often hinge on theories of moral disengagement, bonding and bridging, and value complexity. The most important lesson for increasing resilience is that programmes should be offered to different target audiences simultaneously within a multi-agency setting, preferably bottom-up instead of top-down (Williams *et al.*, 2016b; Mirahmadi, 2016). Research has shown that top-down community engagement, for example, can make communities feel singled out and stigmatized (O’Toole *et al.*, 2012, 2016; Choudhury & Fenwick, 2011; Vermeulen, 2014). So, while the underlying principles of community engagement seem logical and noble, the way it is executed can have unintended and even negative

consequences. This is an important lesson for policymakers. As most research on community engagement concerns the UK, it is time that researchers look at whether unintended negative effects of community engagement also apply in other European countries.

- Chapters 2 and 5 illustrated that exit programmes are aimed at de-radicalization, disengagement, rehabilitation or reintegration. Exit requires a long-term and holistic approach that takes into account push and pull factors and combines multiple interventions which activate different mechanisms. Examples of interventions commonly used are mentoring, practical support, family support, physical and psychological assessment and counselling and theological and ideological guidance. The sequence of interventions in an exit programme is important and must be tailored to the needs of the individual. Practical interventions can help build trust, allowing other interventions to move forward. Creating a safe and stable family environment can be an important precondition to effective mentoring and self-reflection. The forming of an alternative social network is essential to compensate for loss of friends. The success of an exit programme is dependent on the extent to which it is integral and holistic and addresses normative, affective and practical issues (Gielen, 2018a). While Demant *et al.* (2010) previously stressed that exit programmes for jihadists focus too much on the ideological component and not enough on the affective (peer network) component, this lesson seems to have been forgotten. Chapter 5 further underlines the importance of taking the affective factor into account when developing and evaluating exit programmes. The Pro-Integration Model (Barrelle, 2015) has proven an effective tool for measuring the outcomes of exit activities. Future research on exit programmes should apply this model, seeking to establish the levels of (dis)engagement. While both research and practice suggest that a ‘soft’ and voluntary approach to exit is more favourable, chapter 5 indicates that legal and administrative instruments might also be helpful in creating conditions conducive to exit. These contextual conditions should be taken into account both in developing and in evaluating exit programmes.
- Family support is a relatively new intervention in CVE and as a consequence has hardly been studied. At the time of this dissertation research, very few studies had been done on families of foreign fighters and their needs (Gielen, 2015a; Weenink, 2015; Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2015; Maher & Neumann, 2016). Maher and Neumann (2016) analysed public documents on 46 families of foreign fighters in 17 countries. They found grief, confusion, fear and shame to be the most important impacts

on families. Chapter 6 confirmed these insights. In our interviews and focus group with families of foreign fighters, we found that nearly all of these families had particular personal and socio-psychological problems, similar to people who participate in 'regular' support groups. However, additionally we found that families of foreign fighters dealt with very specific problems not mentioned in the general literature on support groups. For instance, all were confronted with consequences of the extremist behaviour of their child/family member, in the form of sometimes severe legal repercussions, administrative measures and public exposure.

- While the little research that is available on family support suggests that families are an important target audience for CVE (Sieckelink & De Winter, 2015; Neumann & Maher, 2016), it provides no answers as to what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances. Chapters 2, 4 and 6 extensively described the different forms of family support. Family support in the form of parental coaching, awareness raising and parental support groups helps parents identify early-warning signals and stimulates positive parenting styles in order to reduce the attraction of extremist groups and enhance protective factors against radicalization. Family support can be offered at different stages on the path that can lead to violent extremism. At the primary preventive stage, it can be provided to parents of individuals at risk, to address their concerns and help them work toward (maintaining) a positive family environment in which extremist ideas can be discussed and alternatives provided. If radical or extremist ideas lead to travel to a conflict zone abroad, family support can then be aimed at maintaining contact with the family member abroad, in order to create a positive environment for the family member to return home to. Families can also be supported while a child or relative is imprisoned or afterward, in the reintegration and rehabilitation process, as families are a crucial factor in deradicalization and disengagement. Family support can be provided individually via outreach programmes or collectively in support groups (Gielen 2015a; Gielen, 2017a). Chapter 6 described the case of establishing a Dutch support group programme for families of foreign fighters. Our ex ante realistic evaluation yielded insights that were not anticipated beforehand. Dutch families of foreign fighters harboured much resentment against the government. So it might have been logical to have a volunteer or community organization set up the support group programme. However, families were adamant that a professional organization should set up the support groups. In their

opinion, the government was the only one who could deliver the required professionalism. This was a surprising outcome of the realistic ex ante evaluation. Families' input also provided valuable information about the content of the group sessions. Some scholars might argue that the value of such an ex ante realistic evaluation is limited to this one CVE case, to the Dutch context and to a specific timeframe (before the defeat of the caliphate), and that it cannot be similarly applied to other geographical contexts and situations. Indeed, the C-M-O model developed cannot be applied one-to-one in Denmark or France, for example. However, the C-M-O model in table 6.4 does provide a canvas that those countries could develop further to understand the contextual requirements, the underlying mechanisms and the potential outcomes of such group support programmes in their situation. The evidence-based policy theory developed here provides a starting point for tailoring support programmes to the specific needs of the families concerned and the infrastructure of the country in which they reside.

- Counter-communication in the form of counter-narratives or alternative narratives has become a popular CVE intervention. The rationale behind counter-communication is that it can reduce or dispel the extremist narrative. It is thought to provide a positive alternative to take-down measures for extremist online content. Though the intervention is rather novel, counter-communication is already receiving scrutiny. Chapter 2 provided insights as to why. First, the causal relationship between exposure to extremist content and violent extremism remains unproven (Ferguson, 2016). The few online counter-narrative programmes that have been evaluated do not address the underlying mechanisms of the radicalization process (Davies *et al.*, 2016). This is an important lesson for policymakers, among whom counter-narratives have become a new buzz word and assumed magic solution. Preliminary research suggests that caution should be exercised in implementing counter-narratives. Further research is necessary to test the underlying mechanisms of counter-narratives, alongside the type of content that does and does not appeal to the various target audiences, and whether counter-narratives should be deployed overtly or covertly and by civil society or governments (Gielen, 2017a).
- CVE is still very much in flux. We are constantly learning new things about what causes violent extremism, who are the main gatekeepers to violent extremism and who is most vulnerable to radicalization. Peers seem to be forgotten in most CVE programmes, though as chapter 2 observed, Williams *et al.* (2016a) found that peers may be best



positioned to notice early signs of violent extremism. Williams *et al.* (2016b) suggested peer gatekeeper training as an important element of evidence-based CVE policy. Additionally, chapters 2 and 6 found that those close to (deceased) violent extremists, such as brothers, sisters, cousins and peers, form an at-risk group for violent extremism, as they may be subjected to grooming while in a vulnerable state. CVE programmes, but also the CVE literature, often overlook these groups. Prior to the research by Williams *et al.* (2016a, 2016b), the role of peers had not been noted in the literature at all. Greater support for families and for the broader professional social network of the family (including, e.g., school teachers) could enable practitioners and family members to act upon early-warning signals to prevent radicalization of other family members and peers (Gielen, 2017a).

- Another often-overlooked target audience of CVE is women. Women are typically considered victims of violent extremism and passive agents framed, for example, as ‘jihadi brides’. Chapter 5 illustrated that their threat should not be underestimated and that interventions should be tailored to their needs and circumstances. CVE programmes should thus include extremist women as a specific target group, for example, by offering exit programmes for women. The empirical framework for exit programmes is already very limited (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013), and this is even more so for exit programmes targeted specifically for women. A key task for the scientific community will be adding to our empirical framework on home-grown female violent extremism in general and exit programmes for women in particular (Gielen, 2018a).
- CVE should not be concerned only with ‘best practices’, but also with ‘best people’. Quality standards for CVE intervention providers have not yet received any scientific attention, though chapters 2, 5 and 6 highlighted the importance of the practitioners providing an intervention. Experience, level of training and knowledge on violent extremism; ability to operate in a multi-agency setting; and the extent to which an intervention provider is able to establish a trust-based relationship with vulnerable individuals and his or her family are imperative contextual conditions to successful CVE outcomes (Gielen, 2017a, 2018a). The quality of CVE intervention providers should become a research focus for scholars and be taken into account when evaluating CVE interventions. Policymakers should uphold the same standards for CVE intervention providers as they do for practitioners in sectors such as education and youth work. Ethnicity or religiosity should never be the sole criteria for selecting CVE intervention providers.

## 7.7 Recommendations for CVE evaluation

The introduction of this dissertation highlighted the fact that CVE is a contested concept. The assumptions underlying CVE and the target audience that CVE programmes aim to address are to this day considered highly problematic and stigmatizing (Kundnani & Hayes, 2018; Van San, 2018; Fadil *et al.*, 2019). This raises the question of whether we should continue with CVE at all and if evaluation of CVE is not in fact merely a legitimization of a highly contested policy. On the basis of my dissertation, particularly chapter 6, which illustrated that *ex ante* realistic evaluation that includes the target audience of CVE, can yield more effective and legitimate policy, I firmly believe that we should continue to evaluate CVE. Only with thorough evaluation can we expose (contested) normative assumptions about CVE policy. Moreover, evaluation can contribute to theory building and help us to achieve more informed policymaking.

While it is quintessential that researchers around the world start to evaluate (more) CVE programmes and interventions, it must be observed that conducting more evaluations requires the active input of policymakers and practitioners. Evaluation should be on the agenda prior to implementation of a CVE programme or intervention. In fact, evaluation should be part of the *policy design* process for CVE programmes. I have therefore sought to develop an approach to evaluating solutions that enables us to scrutinize underlying assumptions (rooted in literature, folk theory or more pragmatic or normative considerations) and to construct better understanding, that could inform future policy design.

On these issues, I have published a set of recommendations for the Flemish and Belgium context on evaluation and CVE (Gielen, 2017b; Gielen, 2018c). Let me close by reiterating here some of them, as they apply not only to Belgian policymakers and practitioners, but in fact to all CVE practitioners and policymakers around the globe.

1. ***Make evaluation an integral part the CVE programme, preferably by embedding the CVE programme in a department where monitoring and evaluation is general practice.*** Research (Gielen, 2018c) shows that municipalities that have integrated their CVE policy into an organization or department with a framework for monitoring and evaluation are more inclined to include evaluation in their CVE policy and practice.
2. ***Organize frequent exchanges between scientists, policymakers, practitioners and civil society actors to share good evaluation practices***

*for CVE policy.* Many conferences, workshops and meetings revolve around the issue of violent extremism as a phenomenon or CVE as a policy issue. Although evaluation of CVE policy is still in its infancy, there are numerous inspiring practices in Europe and around the globe that could and should be shared during multidisciplinary meetings of policymakers, practitioners, civil society actors and academics.

3. ***Devote 10% of the CVE budget to evaluation.*** Lack of resources is often a reason why it is not possible to organize an evaluation. To overcome this issue and to illustrate that evaluation is an important matter, 10% of the CVE budget should be reserved for evaluation.
4. ***Set up a CVE evaluation database similar to the Cochrane database in the medical field.*** Chapter 3 found that in just one year's time, the field of CVE had developed so rapidly that the number of studies relevant to the realist review had nearly doubled. The rapid development of the CVE field presumably will continue. This does raise questions about how long the findings of such a review remain current and thus relevant for policymakers. Ideally, the academic community should develop a database similar to that of Cochrane in the medical field, to make it possible to take stock of evaluation developments in CVE and use the newest CVE evaluation studies as the input for more refined realist reviews.
5. ***Clearly distinguish a CVE programme from interventions.*** A CVE programme is a combination of interventions that addresses the full spectrum of the prevention continuum: primary, secondary and tertiary. Interventions, on the other hand, are specific activities which are part of a broader CVE programme. Interventions can be diverse, ranging from a theatre production on jihad for high school students to a family support group for parents of foreign fighters. Interventions can be targeted at different audiences, at an individual, group or collective level. For example, vulnerable or extremist individuals can be targeted, or schools, families or communities. When considering evaluation, it has to be clear: Is the CVE programme as a whole being evaluated, or is just one intervention, or set of interventions, being examined?
6. ***Address grievances, causes and risk factors associated with violent extremism, but also protective factors.*** Practitioners and policymakers can draw on different models that have been developed for addressing the grievances, causes and risk factors for violent extremism. Campelo *et al.* (2018) have conducted a systematic literature review of causes of violent extremism in Europe. That review highlights a multitude of risk factors at a personal, micro-environmental and macro-environmental

level. At the individual level, the study identified different traits and psychological vulnerabilities, such as having a depressive nature, experiences with addictive and risky behaviour; early experiences of abandonment; vulnerable family structures; a quest for an ideal; personal uncertainty; perceived injustice; trigger events such as trauma and (near) death; and psychopathological mechanisms that reinforce extremist engagement. Micro-environmental factors include having radicalized peers, a dysfunctional family and sympathy with the sectarian use of dehumanization to justify violence. At the macro-environmental level, they identified the following as risk factors: social polarization; perceived group threat; the role of religious ideology; the geopolitical context; and processes of societal change. Ranstorp (2016) offered a 'kaleidoscopic overview' of nine risk factors related to violent extremism: (i) individual and (ii) social factors such as frustration and alienation; (iii) political and (iv) ideological factors such as dissatisfaction with foreign policies and interference with religious practices; (v) identity crises reinforced by a migration biography or post-traumatic stress disorder; and (vi) group dynamics and recruitment strategies consisting of (vii) groomers and (ix) social media (Gielen, 2017b; Sieckelinck & Gielen, 2018). Although risk factors can provide insight into which risks need to be contained or countered, they cannot offer guidelines for protective policies or for positive action (Sieckelinck & Gielen, 2018). Sieckelinck and Gielen (*ibid.*) therefore developed a kaleidoscopic model based on protective factors and a resilience-based course of action. Any CVE programme should address the different risk factors and protective factors involved in violent extremism. However, one should realize that there are critical schools of thought that question whether it is possible at all to develop overarching theories and models to explain violent extremism.

7. **Formulate goals.** Many CVE policy documents speak of deradicalization of young people via special educational programmes when in fact they mean increasing resilience. Deradicalization requires someone to first be radicalized. It is important to accurately formulate what each CVE intervention aims to achieve and what the overall CVE programme seeks to contribute. What type of prevention – primary, secondary or tertiary – does the intervention aim for? Is the envisaged outcome to increase resilience, or deradicalization and disengagement?
8. **Identify target audiences accordingly.** Alongside formulation of goals for the CVE programme and different interventions, the target audience must be carefully selected and realistic goals set regarding what can be achieved per target group. An educational programme alone will never

deradicalize violent extremists. But an educational programme can increase the resilience of vulnerable, at-risk groups and individuals.

9. ***Formulate a theory of change for each CVE programme and intervention.*** Describe the theory or mechanisms at the heart of each intervention. This might seem difficult for non-scientists. Asking relevant questions can help: Why do you think that the CVE intervention you want to implement will help prevent or counter violent extremism? What specific elements of the intervention might help achieve the goals? Do you know of any practice-based or scientific-based evidence that might support your assumption? If you can formulate the answers to these questions you will have managed to formulate a theory of change.
10. ***Make use of existing theory and evaluations.*** Although CVE evaluations are scarce, the body of literature on CVE and CVE evaluations is growing. Full use should be made of the available knowledge, from peer-reviewed journals to research reports and CVE manuals for practitioners and policymakers, such as the *RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices* (RAN, 2019). If there is no literature at all available, make use of other bodies of literature. For example, from the long history of crime prevention research we already know that boot camps and re-educational institutions do not work. Is it then likely that these interventions, for example, will work in CVE? If there is very little knowledge available on parental support groups for foreign fighters, why not consult the literature on support groups for parents with a child who is addicted, terminally ill or deceased? Chapter 6 illustrated that using other bodies of literature can provide theories of change and relevant preconditions for increasing the effectiveness of support groups dedicated to families of foreign fighters.
11. ***Formulate smart indicators at three levels.*** Evaluation is only possible if goals and indicators are formulated from the outset for CVE programmes and interventions. An indicator essentially is a goal specification. It details requirements that help evaluators decide if the goals have been met. There are different types of indicators. Structural indicators revolve around essential preconditions that have to be met. For example, a structural indicator for an intervention to increase the resilience of young people via education is the training of educational staff to carry out such a project. A process indicator helps one to make statements on the output of an intervention, such as how many pupils are to be reached with an educational resilience training or how many phone calls a family telephone hotline should receive in order to be considered a success. Process indicators are only indicative of the number of people reached

with an intervention; they cannot tell us anything about the quality or effect of the intervention. For that, we need to formulate outcome indicators. An example of an outcome indicator is that the resilience of high school students who followed a resilience educational programme is increased by X% after the intervention. Or that, for example, 80% of the parents who phoned a family hotline were satisfied with the help they received.

12. ***Make use of existing questionnaires and measurement tools.*** To measure, for example, whether resilience against violent extremism increased after an intervention, we first need to assess the levels of resilience before the CVE intervention was implemented. Mann *et al.* (2015) developed a questionnaire to measure resilience against violent extremism. If such a questionnaire is used prior to and after an intervention, we are then able to say something about the extent that resilience levels did or did not increase. Measurement of deradicalization or disengagement can be done with different measurement tools prior to and after an exit programme. For example, Barrelle's (2015) Pro-Integration Model can be used to assess levels of disengagement. Another instrument is the 'radical belief system' questionnaire by Doosje *et al.* (2013). The Revised Religious Fundamentalism Scale by Altemeyer and Hunsberger (2004) provides an indicator for fundamentalism and the Violent Extremist Risk Assessment 2 Revised (Vera-2R) (Pressman *et al.*, 2016) assesses the degree of risk for violent extremism.
13. ***Use multi-method data collection.*** We should not lose ourselves in a methodological battle prioritizing quantitative over qualitative methods or vice versa. Rather, the best of both worlds should be combined. While the above-mentioned questionnaires and scales are very useful for assessing the causal relationships between interventions and outcomes, and tell us *if* the intervention worked (or not), they provide no insight into why and how the interventions works. For this, qualitative methods such as participant observation and interviews should be included in evaluations.
14. ***Include researchers or evaluators prior to implementation.*** Often the evaluation of a CVE programme or intervention is unforeseen until the programme or intervention has ended. This seriously limits the options for thorough evaluation and rules out any form of effect evaluation with pre and post measurements.
15. ***Demand a thorough project plan from external partners.*** CVE interventions are often carried out by third parties, commercial or non-profit. This can be a perfect solution if statutory bodies lack the time, human

resources and knowledge to execute CVE interventions. However, at the end of the day governments are still responsible for CVE interventions and should act accordingly by at least demanding that external partners provide a thorough project plan. If the above-mentioned criteria are not part of a project plan, governments should not subsidize it.