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Evaluating countering violent extremism (CVE)

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Chapter 2

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Chapter 3

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Chapter 4

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Chapter 5

Gielen, Amy-Jane (2018a), "Exit Programmes for Female Jihadists: A Proposal for Conducting a Realistic Evaluation of the Dutch Approach," *International Sociology*, Vol. 33 (4), pp. 454-472, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580918775586>

Chapter 6

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*Gielen and Dijkman developed the research design. Gielen and Dijkman collected and analysed the data for realistic evaluation. Gielen collected and analysed the data for the realist review. They made the final interpretation together. Gielen drafted the manuscript.

Summary Cutting through Complexity. Evaluating Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

Introduction

As a scientific community we are still unable to answer the question of 'what works in CVE'. That is because of the complex nature of CVE and the lack of an evidence-based culture in our research field. Combined, this has led to a lack of evaluation studies. Those limited evaluations that we can draw upon are very heterogeneous, both in terms of evaluation method used and the type of interventions addressed. It is therefore impossible to make any specified, let alone general, statements on the effectiveness of CVE. Moreover, the question of 'what works' is too simplistic. The wicked nature of radicalization and violent extremism requires an evaluation method that unmasks 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.²¹ However, the realistic evaluation method did appear to be

21 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.

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 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 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? These questions 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.

Applying and developing realist review

Realist review is a method of meta-analysis. It is not meant for the evaluation of single interventions, but rather for synthesizing *existing* evaluation studies. 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. 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 help 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 may, 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.

Realist review is conducted in six steps: clarifying the scope of the review, searching for primary studies, appraising quality, extracting the data, synthesizing the data and disseminating the findings. However, due to the realist and iterative nature of the review process, there can be no technical manual on how to conduct realist review. As a consequence, it is not always clear how realist review works in practice. In fact, Pawson and Manzano-Santaella (2012) observed that very few realist reviews actually abide by the realist principles, and that they may therefore report misleading conclusions and recommendations.

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. 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.

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. Chapter 3 presented and applied adapted heuristic guidelines for realist review (see table 3.3). In essence, it is not possible to formulate a hypothetical middle-range theory on what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances from the outset when conducting a realist review of CVE programmes – or any other complex social programmes that display the above-mentioned characteristics. Rather, the review should revolve around getting a better notion of the complex social phenomenon addressed by the programme. To do that, the review must draw out relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes instead of testing and comparing different theories. This makes it possible to develop a more refined model of the complex social programme while at the same time upholding the realist principles. Primary studies should then be judged not in terms of how much they contribute to a specific explanatory challenge, but rather on whether they provide insight into what the complex social programme entails. When evaluations are lacking and very heterogeneous, inclusion criteria must be less strict. Besides qualitative and quantitative studies, process evaluations and theory-driven studies should also be included. Data analysis requires a systematic approach that conceptually focuses on the complex social programme at hand and relevant contexts, mechanisms, outcomes and lessons learnt regarding the intervention.

Applying and developing realistic evaluation

Realistic evaluation is particularly helpful for examining specific interventions within CVE. Examples are 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 outcome (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 and 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', which might also be referred to as policy theories. 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 and return 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 are 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 specifically 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.

Realistic policy design

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:
 - If such an intervention were implemented, which contextual conditions would need to be met?
 - What mechanisms underlie the specific intervention?
 - 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.

Methodological contribution

The methodological contribution of my dissertation research is that it has developed heuristic guidelines for inductive and deductive theory development for wicked problems such as CVE. These type of complex problems 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 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. Ultimately, these programme specifications and theory development also make it possible to design more evidence-based and legitimate policy.

Contributing to the CVE policy and scientific community

While heuristic development of the realistic evaluation method comprises an important part of this research, the current study is not strictly methodological in nature. It aims, 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 CVE. The most important lessons are summarized in chapter 7:

- ‘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. 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 (Gielen, 2017a).
- Exit programmes can be aimed at deradicalization, 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 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, my research on Dutch municipal exit programmes indicates that legal and administrative instruments can also be helpful in creating the right conditions for exit. These contextual conditions should be taken into account both in developing and in evaluating exit programmes (Gielen, 2018a).
- Family support is a relatively new intervention in CVE and as a consequence has hardly received any scientific attention as yet. Recent research suggests that families are an important target audience for CVE (Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2015; Maher & Neumann, 2016). Maher and Neumann (2016) found grief, confusion, fear and shame to be the most important impacts of violent extremism 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. The existing literature provided no answers as to what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances. 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. 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, such as Syria or Iraq, family support can then be aimed at maintaining contact with the child or relative abroad and creating a positive environment for the child or relative 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 (Gielen, 2015a; Gielen, 2017a).

- 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 online content. Preliminary research suggests 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).
- Peers appear forgotten in most CVE programmes, though Williams *et al.* (2016a) found that peers may be best positioned to notice early signs of violent extremism. Additionally, my research shows 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. Supporting families and 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).

- Women are typically considered victims of violent extremism and passive agents framed, for example, as ‘jihadi brides’. My research suggests 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 geared for women (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 both the review and the evaluations analysed highlight the importance of the practitioners providing the 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.

Recommendations for evaluation

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 of CVE programmes. In this regard, I propose the following recommendations:

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.
2. Organize frequent exchanges between scientists, policymakers, practitioners and civil society actors to share good evaluation practices for CVE policy.
3. Devote 10% of the CVE budget to evaluation.

4. Set up a CVE evaluation database similar to the Cochrane database in the medical field.
5. Clearly distinguish a CVE programme from interventions.
6. Address grievances, causes and risk factors associated with violent extremism, but also protective factors.
7. Formulate goals.
8. Identify target audiences accordingly.
9. Formulate a theory of change for each CVE programme and intervention.
10. Make use of existing theory and evaluations.
11. Formulate smart indicators at three levels.
12. Use multi-method data collection.
13. Make use of existing questionnaires and measurement tools.
14. Include researchers or evaluators prior to implementation.
15. Demand a thorough project plan from external partners.