UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

EMBEDDING HUMAN RIGHTS IN COUNTERING EXTREMISM:

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD AND PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE
July 2019

By Dr Katherine E. Brown[1],
Professor Fiona de Londras[2] and Jessica White[3]

These papers have been published by an independent body. The views and opinions expressed are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the UK Government.

Introduction[4]

Countering Extremism (henceforth CE) programmes and policies have been criticised for infringing on human rights because they are state-centric and security orientated in design,[5] and because they can have unintended disproportionate impacts on rights such as those to freedom of expression, assembly, family life, and non-discrimination. The expanding remit of CE (and counter-terrorism) since 2001, but particularly since 2005 in the UK, means that state and security agendas now infuse many more areas of 'ordinary living' than would previously been countenanced,[6] with disproportionate impact on socio-economically disadvantaged parts of society.[7] As a consequence CE can be ineffective: extremist beliefs regarding state excess and victimisation of populations can inadvertently be affirmed, extremist behaviours strengthened as the state loses trust as the provider of human security or wellbeing, and extremist modes of belonging and identity normalised. As a result, there are vocal demands for alternative approaches to CE in the United Kingdom.[8]

There are two main challenges to unpacking these critiques and responding to calls for change. The first is recognising 'how' CE produces outcomes of this kind, and the second is identifying alternatives that may mitigate such impacts and produce better outcomes. This paper begins to address these two knowledge gaps. It does so through utilising expert and practitioner testimony via a small number of interviews (18) and an expert workshop, as well as a review of existing research on countering extremism.[9] It proceeds by (a) outlining our participants' general understanding and critiques of CE in the UK, (b) drawing out specific critiques requiring attention, and (c) proposing the instigation of a rights-based approach to CE and of independent review of CE activities so that the effectiveness and outcomes (including negative societal impact) of CE initiatives can be identified through systematic and robust independent processes.

Part 1: Practitioner Perspectives on Existing Approaches

Generally speaking seven domains of CE activity can be identified: family & parenting, community, counter-narratives, policing and criminal justice, human

---

rights, education, and health care.[10] Drawing on these seven identified sectors, we recruited participants across multiple domains in order to achieve representation from the different activities that appear to constitute CE, ranging from peace building activists, to people working in women's refuges, to HIV+ and alcohol addiction support groups. In their public-facing materials, the organisations we approaches articulated an intent to address the beliefs, behaviours, and modes of belonging of those groups or individuals who are unwilling to share the world with Others.[11]

Participant Views of What CE is

Each research participant was asked what they understood 'countering extremism' to entail, how they understood CE success, what constituted best practice, and what barriers, risks and challenges they faced in their work. We did not impose definitions upon participants, instead following an approach that allowed their understanding of extremism and their work to drive their responses.

Generally speaking our interviewees considered 'extremism' difficult to define, but believed that it ought to be countered. In all but two cases, interviewees considered that extremism was an attitude or belief that can be countered through dialogue, education, and exposure to alternative beliefs with trusted interlocutors. This resonates with HMG's Strategy for Countering Extremism (2015) (which defines extremism as "the vocal or active opposition to our fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs"[12]) and the most recent articulation of CONTEST (which refers to extremism as the

"promotion of hatred, the erosion of women's rights, the spread of intolerance, and the isolation of communities"[13]).

Aligning with the CONTEST strategy of attending to isolated communities,[14] the practitioners we spoke to stressed the need to create spaces where persons can have contact with non-extremist ideas and with 'Others' in order to create opportunities for extremism to be doubted and challenged from within. For these interviewees, offering alternatives to extremism required unpacking the concept of 'the Other', which meant working with and between communities to develop bridging, bonding and linking relationships.[15] Strong alternative narratives that resonated with vulnerable groups and were delivered through authentic, credible messages were also considered important. So too were opportunities to divert energies from possible extremist narratives and activities, although only where such diversionary activities had meaningful outcomes and opportunities for individual or collective success built into them. Alternative narratives had to exist in spaces where the 'say-do' gap was narrowed or where the diversionary activities helped to close those gaps. Thus, communities and narratives were considered very important; we discuss them more below.

It was noticeable that our interviewees often had a narrower vision of CE than the Government's policies suggest. For them, CE did not include addressing socio-cultural practices such as FGM, forced marriage, or domestic violence. The suggestion was that such a definition was too broad; that "We have to specialise in something".[16] Organisations that did specialise in such work were asked to participate but declined, responding that their work was not "countering extremism" but rather concerned with women's rights.[17] Thus, there

10   Brown, K. E., (forthcoming) "The Role and Impact of Women's Influence in Radicalisation and Counter-Radicalisation" (London: I.B. Tauris, Bloomsbury); Heath-Kelly, C., (2016) "Algorithmic Auto-immunity in the NHS: Radicalisation and the Clinic", Security Dialogue 48(1), pp. 29-45; and from preliminary findings from the 'Counterterrorism Curricula in English Schools: Positive and Negative Peace in the War on Terror' project (Max Batley Seedcorn Funding, University of Sheffield).

11   Jose, J. (2015) 'A Liberalism Gone Wrong? Muscular Liberalism and the Quest for Monocultural Difference', Social Identities 21(5), pp.444–458.

12   Home Office (2015) Counter Extremism Strategy CM9145, (London Crown Copyright),. It is not just the UK with these strategies, see also: Australia, 'Living Safe Together Strategy' http://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/pages/home.aspx; Canada, 'Counter-Extremism Strategy'; http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrt/cntr-trrrsm/cntrng-vlnt-xtrmsm/index-en.aspx; USA, 'Department of State and USAID Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism' http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/257913.pdf ; Denmark, 'A common and safe future https://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/58D048E7-0482-4AE8-99EB-928753EFC1F8/0/a_common_and_safe_future_danish_action_plan_to_prevent_extremism.pdf accessed 17th April 2019.

13   https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counter-terrorism-strategy-contest-2018 p.23

14   Ibid. p.23. See also: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/integrated-communities-strategy-green-paper.

15   Ellis, B.H. and Abdil S. (2017) "Building Community Resilience to Violent Extremism through genuine partnerships" American Psychologist 72(3) pp.289-300.

16   Participant 10.

17   We approached over thirty organisations/individuals across a variety of sectors to participate in this work from around the UK. As a result, eighteen participated; two stated that they would not engage or legitimise the work of the Commission for Countering Extremism by participating in this research; three stated that their work was not relevant, and four did not respond, and three responded but too late for inclusion in this research. Participants were from a range of ethnic, religious backgrounds (7 identified as Muslim, 12 men, 6 women, and 9 BME).

appears to be a dissonance between practitioner and civil society understanding of CE, and the range of activities captured by the Strategy for Countering Extremism. However, even with participants' refinement and boundary policing of what counted as CE, they were each addressing vastly disparate phenomena under the label 'countering extremism', and it is not clear that these phenomena derive from or are sustained through the same mechanisms. Some of the participants thus questioned the utility of linking these areas together under the umbrella of CE and E. What participants did agree on was that CE was closely linked to countering violent extremism (CVE) and counter-terrorism. In many of the interviews there was slippage in terms, foci and agendas, with many treating CE, CVE, and PREVENT work as synonymous. Given the overlap in the 2015 and 2017 policy strategies this is not surprising. Differentiating these policy and conceptual terms has become a process of negotiation about the legitimacy of a security and CE logic in particular areas of potential state intervention. However, it is interesting that in spite of the attempt to pluralise and expand the concept of 'extremism' through mechanisms such as the Strategy for Countering Extremism, for practitioners the links between CE, CVE and counter-terrorism remain strong suggesting that CE is conceptualised as closely connected with security rhetorics.

Participant views of 'success' in CE

Practitioners' definitions of 'success' in CE were strikingly vague. Many interviewees seemed to define success on a micro level, linking it to fulfilment of programme objectives (by reference to outputs or outcomes), reflecting one interviewee's view that success "really depended on what you wanted to achieve"[18].

This idea that project objectives, measurable in outputs or outcomes, determined success appeared to be linked with the funding and structural conditions of civil society,[19] with organisations seeking funding for specific programmes lasting specific amounts of time and required to report on 'effectiveness' or success in a specifiable, measurable, and quantifiable way.

It was thus not surprising that for our interviewees success was rarely linked to a grand theory of societal change.

Indeed, interviewees suggested that, much like counter-radicalisation activities, in practice CE is biased towards methodological individualism[20] so that success was measured according to either the number of individuals engaged with or the depth of an individual's engagement with the programmes delivered. This meant that, with the exception of two interviewees, altering structural conditions and drivers of extremism were not addressed when we asked participants how they understood success. The two interviewees who did address these stated respectively that in order for CE to be successful "real grievances of communities and individuals needed to be corrected for", and that "the rise in extremism cannot be untangled from austerity measures".[21] However, in practice, neither these individuals nor the organisations for which they worked tackled these structural and material factors in their CE efforts.

Participant views of the role of 'community' in CE

Despite this methodological individualism, CE is often focused on "community". The linkage between CE and "working with communities" derives from early PREVENT-funded initiatives and results in a wide range of initiatives such as women's empowerment activities, interfaith dialogue, sporting events, youth work, extremism awareness raising, and resilience building being encompassed in the rubric of CE. These types of CE activities occur through a range of local authority, civil society, entrepreneur and philanthropic organisations. They are currently being promoted and supported by Baroness Williams' Building a Stronger Britain Together (BSBT) programme.[22] BSBT provides two types of funding for organisations working in particular areas: project funding and 'support in kind'.

This approach reflects the counter-terrorism and securitised framing of extremism as both a cause and consequence of "isolated communities" (as seen in CONTEST). A number of local authority strategies (such

18   Participant 7.
19   van Taul, P. and Jordan, L. (2006) NGO Accountability: politics, principles and innovations. Choudry, A., and Kapoor, D. (2013) NGOization: complicity, contradictions and prospects. Zed Press. Lang, S. (1997) "The NGOization of Feminism: Transitions, Environments, Translations", in Scott, J. W., Kaplan, C. and Keates, D. (eds) Feminism in International Politics (New York: Routledge).
20   We see especially with Channel work, where grievances and vulnerabilities are individualized, the individual is found responsible for their vulnerabilities and recovery. This becomes apparent when you view the range of activities in Channel – for some examples please refer to Khan, S., McMahon, T. (2016) The Battle for British Islam: Reclaiming Muslim Identity from Extremism (London: Saqi Books). This is also found in the language surrounding 'safeguarding'.
21   Participants 4 and 5. Participant 1 also discussed the idea of 'abandoned' and 'ignored' communities.
22   Home Office (2016) Building a Stronger Britain https://www.gov.uk/guidance/building-a-stronger-britain-together.

as Leeds, Luton and Lewisham) assert that they will "build more cohesive communities" in order to respond to the challenge of extremism.[23]

Our interviewees stressed the importance of "working with" not "to" communities, i.e. of creating "bottom up" initiatives where possible.[24] However, interviewees reported that the legacy of counter-terrorism engagement, institutional racism in police forces, ambiguity and overlap between local authority PREVENT leads' and counter-extremisms leads' roles, and a "hostile environment" for immigrants, means that there is some resistance and distrust regarding such community focused activities.[25] As one interviewee stated: "Ordinary people don't understand the distinction between government funding projects – they just associate program directives with being spied on".[26] Our interviewees noted that overcoming this hostility and rebuilding trust required them to rely on their personal authority, build relationships, lean on established networks, facilitate and support communities in other fields, and be constantly available and present.

In spite of the challenge clearly posed to the establishment of trust with communities, our interviewees were of the view that community oriented approaches are important, and especially that they can address extremist beliefs by addressing individual components of extremist ideology. In this respect interviewees noted the usefulness of challenging victimhood narratives, offering communities opportunities to engage with PREVENT leads or the police or local councils in open forums, or challenging the exclusivist narratives of extremists by showing mutual shared interests across communities. For our interviewees, community orientated CE work addressed extremist behaviours by, for example, offering alternative activities if extremist groups were marching in their towns, or offering everyday alternative activities that channelled young

people's energy for change and engagement. Modes of extremist belonging were challenged through these activities by breaking down divisions across communities through shared activities, interfaith dialogue, and facilitating everyday contact with those of other communities via business breakfasts, trade unions, and council meetings.

Participants' views of Counter-Narratives

Reflecting the Government's view that "terrorism is really a symptom; ideology is the root cause",[27] much of CE is premised on the importance of winning 'hearts and minds', leading to a flurry of interventions and efforts to build and promote both 'counter-narratives' and 'alternative-narratives'.[28] Our interviewees reinforced the view that such activity should occur both on- and off-line, but suggested that government engagement with such efforts may affirm extremist narratives of government spying, propaganda, and social and religious engineering with unanticipated negative outcomes. Interestingly participants suggested that this is common ground for far right, far left and Islamist-inspired extremist groups. Nevertheless counter-narrative and alternative narrative approaches are at the centre of much of what our participants do. These self-identified 'frontline' workers push back at claims that they are government 'stooges'. Participants identified independence as being essential to their credibility and, for some, a moral imperative when engaged in this work. For some participants this meant, for example, that they would not accept any government funding.

Counter narrative approaches best target the beliefs and ideologies of extremist groups. It is worth noting, as one interviewee did, that counter narratives challenge extremist modes of belonging, but also traditional ideas of community when such efforts are encoun-

23   Local Government Association "Special Interest Group – Countering Extremism" https://www.local.gov.uk/sigce; see also: https://www.leeds.gov.uk/residents/neighbourhoods-and-community/prevent; Lewisham Council (2018) Update on Counter Extremism http://councilmeetings.lewisham.gov.uk/documents/s55623/10UpdateonCounterExtremismStrategy070318.pdf; See also "Luton in Harmony" http://lutoninharmony.co.uk and https://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/663/luton-borough-council-special-interest-group-to-tackle-far-right-extremism.
24   Participants 7, 11 and 12. This approach is also promoted by Hargreaves, J. (2018) "Towards a Cure for Prevent? Building Resilience to Religious and Political Forms of Violence within British Muslim Communities" Journal of Muslims in Europe 7(2) https://doi.org/10.1163/22117954-12341372.
25   Participant 4 and 12 talked specifically about 'hostile environments'.
26   Participant 16.
27   Home Office (2015) Counter Extremism Strategy CM9145 (London: Crown Copyright) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470088/51859_Cm9148_Accessible.pdf page 5. See also House of Commons and House of Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights Counter Extremism: Second Report of Session 2016-2017 HLC Paper 39, HC 105 (London: Crown Copyright) https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201617/jtselect/jtrights/105/105.pdf.
28   Brown, K. E. (2017) "RAN Narratives and Counter-Narratives Best Practices" in RAN Best Practices, Chapter. 7. DJ Home, European Union. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-best-practices_en.

tered in the digital and social media realm.[29] Online counter-narrative efforts include the distribution and co-production of content with communities and NGOs, emphasising different stories and facts to connect with both those being targeted by extremist groups and those inadvertently encountering extremism. Counter-narratives also operate to challenge extremist behaviours by calling into question the need for and likelihood of success of violence, and by suggesting alternative modes of political engagement. In this arena, interviewees stressed the importance of professional-looking content that resonated emotionally as well as factually, and of tracking engagement beyond the number of "clicks".[30] Counter-narrative work is also a large component of 'off-line' CE efforts, through human rights promotion, empowerment activities, diversity and multiculturalism, all of which provide powerful normative and empirical challenges to extremist resistance to sharing the world with Others. These were particularly emphasised for those working with young people, including in schools. In some interviews CE was seen as "future-proofing" against extremism, while other practitioners resisted this idea saying it is not possible to successfully "inoculate" against extremism, because "like viruses, it mutates... we've been treating extremism as a disease, but it acts more like a virus".[31]

Part 2: Specific Challenges Emerging from Participant Perspectives

From the empirical data gathered for this paper, we have drawn out three specific sets of challenges, which we term (i) design and philosophical challenges, (ii) policy challenges, and (iii) implementation challenges.

Design and Philosophical Challenges: The Coercive Nature of CE

In many cases, our research participants considered that CE has coercive effects, especially for minority and disadvantaged sectors of society whose existing experiences of discrimination and differentiation may be exacerbated in the CE domain,[32] but that the coercive nature of CE is neither identified for accounted for in CE design and implementation.

Participants identified three factors that mean CE is properly understood as coercive.

First, the broader policy context in which CE occurs is a coercive one including the 'hostile environment' for immigrants, the securitisation of other policy fields, community co-option, and 'deception'.[33] Thus, while some CE initiatives such as parenting classes may not seem coercive per se, when implemented in this broader policy context they can be experienced as such, especially in communities that are (or perceive themselves to be) heavily surveilled. Furthermore, putative participants may question the extent to which 'voluntary' programmes are truly voluntary (thus implicating their consent to this engagement with the state or state proxies), and communities may experience 'supportive' interventions as being infantilising. While such initiatives may have positive and welcome outcomes, their effectiveness and legitimacy, and their impact on future activities, may be limited because of the context from which they emerge and in which they operate. As one interviewee said "there is a paradox in trying to implement something that almost entirely relies on trust, through a programme that subverts trust... there must be a way to overcome this".[34]

Second, where CE initiatives are couched in or intersect with legal or quasi-legal instruments, their source may make them coercive. This is mostly felt at the individual level where 'consent' is not freely given and the consequences for not agreeing to participate are high. For example, participation in Channel is per se voluntary but a refusal to participate can be followed by, for example, the initiation of child welfare proceedings in respect of children in the non-participant's care. Thus, Channel intersects with a non-voluntary and heavily interventionist legal regime that means its operation is de facto coercive even if de jure voluntary.

Third, the second order consequences of CE efforts can result in outcomes that relate directly to legal processes, or consequences with clearly coercive effects. For example counter extremism concerns influence family court proceedings and passport seizures, even where there is no related established criminal or civil law violation.

29   See also Brown, K. E. and Pearson, E. (2017) "The Online-world, Social Media and Terrorism" in Andrew Silke (ed.), Handbook of Terrorism and Counter-terrorism. (Abingdon: Routledge).
30   Participant 5.
31   Participant 17.
32   Heath-Kelly, C. (2018) "Is Counter-radicalization an Effective Counterterrorist Tool?: NO" in Contemporary Debates on Terrorism, 2nd Edition, edited by Richard Jackson & Daniela Pisoiu (Abingdon: Routledge).
33   Europol (2016) TE-SAT 2016: European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report.(The Hague: European Police Office (Europol)).
34   Participant 9.

Thus, CE is properly understood as coercive in practice. That insight has significant design and philosophical implications because it makes clear the risks of rights violations that may flow from even benign-seeming CE interventions. Thus, the threshold for engaging with different CE initiatives should be determined by reference to the coerciveness of the potential intervention, so that interventions that are only minimally coercive (e.g. parenting classes) would have a very low threshold for intervention (e.g. self-selection by a parent), whereas interventions that have high coercive potential (e.g. invitations to engage with Channel) would have very high thresholds for intervention (e.g. legal advice for the potential participant about the implications of non/engagement). Such an approach would contribute to ensuring that CE is limited and restrained, in-keeping with its coercive nature.

Design and Philosophical Challenges: Presenting Counter-Narratives

A second philosophical and design challenge is that the alternatives to extremist narratives and agendas are difficult to place in easily digestible and glossy forms. While extremist narratives rely on Utopian and often-authoritarian politics that insist upon a singular exclusive account of history, the present, and the future, alternatives and counter arguments must necessarily resist that logic or structure of argument. Instead they need to embrace complexity, risk, and ambiguity. Otherwise the 'alternative' or 'counter' is no less extreme than what it seeks to oppose. This means that diverse, contradictory, oppositional and fragmented alternatives need to be promoted and encountered to fully challenge extremisms.[35] Moreover these may also be alternatives that are not fully supported by the state.

Given CE narratives need to be non-coercive, consensual, and diverse then this raises the question of the appropriate and legitimate role of government and state agencies in CE. Arguably instead of providing content or form to CE efforts, the role of government should be to create the environment in which CE can occur. In line with the as laid out in the UN's Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism (2015), the duty of government is to redress the drivers of and conditions conducive to extremism, not to craft narratives to 'fix for' particular extremisms.

In such a guise, Government becomes a facilitator for civil society CE actions thus engaging in more effective and more restrained CE activity.

Policy Challenges: The Expansiveness of CE

A key observation that emerged from the expert meeting is that although the definition of extremism is contested, positive and meaningful CE contributions can exist where it is locally understood and determined. The local understandings of CE found in the interviews were very specific, and showed that for CE to work it needs to be framed as addressing something more detailed than 'extremism' per se, perhaps being fragmented into extremist behaviours, anti social behaviour, political violence, hate crime or other relevant elements as appropriate to the a particular context. By eschewing the highly generalised notion of 'CE' and focusing on manifestations extremism in practice, interviewees reported that they were able to generate greater connections between policies, interventions and outcomes.

However even at the local level there was also a need to understand what differentiates extremist occurrences of these problematic behaviours from non-extremist occurrences. This was important for recognising that while the outcomes or outward manifestations of these behaviours are similar, the underlying drivers and motivations may not be, and therefore that the solutions to these behaviours are not necessarily the same. As one interviewee put it "they're like false friends from another language, they look like the same thing and you know what they mean, but they're not and you don't."[36] This meant, they argued, and as was reflected in other interviews and desk research, that CE had an expansive agenda; it has become 'the solution' to everyone's problems, but can't actually solve for them.

 "CVE programming, that is PREVENT, has been copied and pasted into issues like knife crime – a mindless recycling of programming that hasn't been proven yet"[37]

This suggests that, paradoxically to the claims of specificity, CE is encountering a kind of enforced mission creep rather than being used to address extremism directly. This is linked to the idea that extremist behaviours, beliefs, and modes of belonging can explain other social harms and violence, thus pursuing an essentialist and securitised notion of CE. For some of our

---

35   As Laclau and Mouffe write, "without conflict and division, a pluralist democratic politics would be impossible" Laclau E, Mouffe, C. (2014) Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics. 2nd edition (London: Verso) pp.xvii–xviii.
36   Participant 18.
37   Participant 10.

participants this leads to the misapplication of counter-extremism; to attempts to use CE to try to 'fix' things that are really manifestations of state and democratic failures (e.g. the collapse of meaningful welfare provision, or disengagement from democratic politics). This relates to the broader context of coercion in which CE is practiced including the failure to enact human rights as positive obligations of the state, austerity, the dismantling of the welfare state, systemic and persistent inequality, and the failure to commit to and resource a vision of substantive equality.

"We accept that Extremism and Counter Extremism is part of the full spectrum of human experiences and connects to those... so there must be a full range of interventions"[38]

This suggests that better understanding is needed of how existing systems (such as the criminal law and welfare provision) might contribute to addressing both extremist and non-extremist beliefs and behaviours. This should be accompanied by objective situation assessment to ascertain whether CE is the appropriate approach in a particular case or context, or whether the existing instruments and systems such as the criminal law, in which human rights are 'built in', might be sufficient. Should such an approach be taken, CE would be a supplementary or 'gap-filling' domain, operating only where other, coercive (e.g. criminal justice) and non-coercive (e.g. welfare) policy approaches are inadequate or inappropriate.

Implementation Challenges: Effectiveness, Funding, and 'Enthusiastic Experts'

By focusing on specifying extremist harms and differentiating these from non-extremist harms (as recommended above), practitioners and policy makers should be able to move past circular debates on defining extremism and instead to engage meaningfully in ascertaining what CE is, what it is for, what its objectives are, and what systematic frameworks to achieve these objectives may be needed. At present there is scant evidence of any such analysis, so that the goals and objectives of CE per se are hard to ascertain. As a result, it is not clear how effectiveness is or should be understood in the CE context, how it can be measured, and what ends CE programmes and policies are intended to serve. CE programmes may produce social goods and reduce social harms not directly related to extremism, but which may incidentally or in correlation lead to a decrease in extremism. However, the connections between activities, policies, programmes and desired outcomes are largely anecdotal and under theorised. The desired 'end state' of CE is often unclear, yet when it is articulated it is generally framed according to a state-security agenda. This reinforces a misalignment between the goals and objectives of the state (enhanced (national) security), and those of local providers (addressing local community challenges). Thus, it is not always clear what objectives a programme should be oriented towards, or how to assess the 'fuzzy' impacts that it has had which may have almost immeasurable implications for countering extremism.

However, as already noted, the funding and civil society structures in which CE is often delivered are not generally set up to account for such hard-to-capture potential outcomes. Rather, civil society often deals in short-term funding structures, needing to propose tightly designed programmes with measureable outcomes, and then able to deliver them only for a funded period of time. As well as impacting on the design of CE programmes, these pragmatic realities can also mean that funding gaps arise and that trust and relationships have to be rebuilt at the start of each project so that projects struggle to build on past activities, and as a result may deliver only surface level interventions. This structure may result in providers and practitioners focusing on delivering measurable micro-objectives of the project (how many outputs, contacts etc.) as opposed to macro-objectives of CE, exaggerating successes and overpromising outcomes (to secure future funding), and reinforcing out-dated stereotypes (misalignment and misidentification of social harms to extremism). Additionally the focus on measuring micro-objectives means that inadvertent and unintended outcomes may not be measured or recognised (e.g. societal and rights impacts) and thus that we may not know about potential counter-productiveness of interventions in non-target populations, or in out-groups etc... This lack of knowledge is not simply because there is a lack of appropriate research (a frequent complaint in this field), but because knowledge about the 'outcomes' and 'impacts' of CE is scaled to that of the delivery provider, local milieu, or particular project type. This makes broader claims about CE difficult to substantiate.

Reflecting these challenges, our interviews suggest that CE interventions and practitioners often have unclear theories of change, and are not sure about whether they are seeking resistance, resilience, or the elimination of extremism. This suggests that a radical

---

38   Participant 5.

account of what CE is seeking to achieve is required, so that macro-objectives can be developed for CE per se. Furthermore, while individual programmes can measure the impact they have had in terms of small-scale outcomes and outputs, there are problems with generalizability and scalability to demonstrate the overall effectiveness of CE interventions and to connect individual projects or interventions with the achievement of the broader objectives of CE per se. In part this is because there is a challenge in demonstrating causality, as opposed to correlation, due to weak theories of change that are only loosely linked to clear ideas of what extremism is.

A third implementation challenge stems from the need for CE practitioners to have local relationships, networks and trust in order to be perceived as legitimate and to be effective (even on their own terms). The consequence is that some interviewees saw themselves as "accidental CE providers,"[39] in other words they were either asked to deliver CE activities, or sought out CE funding to fund existing (albeit amended) projects, or were local activists who were co-opted into the CE space. The consequence is that only two of the interviewees had any formal training or qualifications related to extremism or terrorism. This suggests that much knowledge about CE is experiential, functional and technical, rather than critical, reflexive or emancipatory. As one interviewee put it, in many cases CE is "Enthusiasm without expertise".[40] Questions arise about how well trained people involved in CE are, whether they are themselves safe-guarded, and whether their interventions are appropriate to the situation. This has particular consequences when these groups are providing training to other professional groups regarding radicalisation, extremism and safeguarding.

On the one hand, the involvement of persons without expertise but with good faith in CE reflects the CE and counter-terrorism responsibilisation of a broad range of actors across both the public and private sphere. Without appropriate training, this responsibilisation may have unintended and counter-productive consequences. On the other hand, relying on state-led interventions alone results in the over securitisation of CE provision, and may be counterproductive given the need for trust and local connectivity. Reflecting on this dilemma, different interviewees discussed the need for empathy and understanding, noting that this

was needed not only as an outcome of CE (because these break down barriers between communities) but also as the process of CE. To create this, a consensus emerged from interviewees that all parties need to communicate their objectives, ideas of success, and what they saw as their responsibilities in the CE. This requires a degree of self-awareness and reflexivity, as well as a willingness to engage with partners in a world of distrust and suspicion. In other words, trust building was acknowledged as a complex and oftentimes tacit and unstated component of successful CE activities. The outcome was a recommendation from practitioners and the expert workshop that CE should be built around conditional trust, empathetic cooperation and reflexivity.

Part 3: A Human Rights Based CE

As already outlined, the views and experiences of our research participants identified important critical shortfalls in how CE is conceptualised, delivered, and measured. If CE is understood as being oriented towards achieving large-scale societal change (reduction in extremism) as well as individual results (diversion of individual from extremism), this has important implications or its effectiveness. Reflecting this, we propose two significant changes in how CE is pursued; first that CE should be reoriented to be rights based, and second that CE should be subjected to systematic independent review in order to ensure legitimacy, accountability, and proportionality in CE.

"Embed our responses to Extremism in human rights, pluralism and equalities, give opportunities for other ideas and voices"[41]

As has been acknowledged by practitioners, experts and in the literature review the current system of CE in the UK does not have human rights as a core design principle. Rather the core design principle is that of state security. This is problematic as the UN Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism highlights weak human rights governance and rule of law as a key driver for extremism.[42] A weakened state of human rights protection and rule of law facilitates extremism, while their presence affirms and strengthens resilience to extremism and minimises opportunities for extremism to take hold. This is not merely a concern for "other countries", but is one the UK must take seriously given

---

39   Participant 15.
40   Participant 9.
41   Participant 6.
42   United Nations Secretary General (2015) Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism A/70/674 https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674.

the international criticisms levied at domestic CE policies and programmes for infringing upon and minimising human rights commitments,[43] as well as perceptions of rights infringement among some in 'suspect communities'.

Making human rights protection a design principle of CE would refocus CE towards the needs of society and individuals, while also encouraging state restraint and accountability. This would be supported by our second recommendation to introduce independent review of CE. Human rights express the notion that everyone possesses a set of individual entitlements that protect and promote the core aspects of our well-being, and "recognise and give substance to our equal intrinsic worth...we possess them independently of any other badge of demarcation, be it gender, race, age, religious or other belief, sexual orientation, etc."[44] In other words, at the heart of human rights is a willingness and commitment to share the world with others: the opposite of extremism.

Instantiating a human rights-based approach to CE

We propose that instantiating a rights-based approach to CE requires three steps:

i.   upholding and promoting dignity, equality and rights in CE;
ii. ensuring inclusive design, implementation and evaluation of CE;
iii. to committing to 'do no harm' through CE.

Upholding and promoting dignity, equality and rights in CE would place both adherence to human rights law obligations and a disposition that seeks to sustain the underlying values of dignity and rights in and through CE. At the core of this is the principle of non-discrimination. Reponses to extremism ought not disproportionally to impact particular racial, ethnic, religious or other groups, and racial or religious profiling in both CE and policing or law enforcement must be avoided. Understanding and addressing endemic discrimination, particularly within law enforcement and the criminal

justice system, is critical to understanding how seemingly benign CE interventions may be experienced as or lead to the undermining of dignity, equality, and the enjoyment of human rights . All interferences with and limitation of human rights must be lawful, i.e. must be enacted in accordance with law, serve a legitimate purpose, be proportionate, and be necessary to achieve that identified purpose.[45]

Ensuring inclusive and meaningful design, implementation and evaluation of CE would better protect the principle of non-discrimination in CE. Moreover by bringing 'local' knowledge and experience to bear in all stages it is possible to identify and mitigate potential rights- and equality-based resistance to planned or proposed CE interventions. Thus, CE policies and programmes should be 'locally owned', so that local communities can identify their needs and set CE agendas designed to address them, rather than assuming that the state or local authority 'knows best'. To have an inclusive policy and programme also means that representation and participation should be sought from the widest possible range of members within a community – including those marginalised within it – such as LGBTQI+ religious community members, young women, or disabled persons. Additionally, in the design and implementation of programmes the diverse needs of different sections of communities should be addressed and any barriers eliminated so that, for example, appropriate steps are taken to ensure that caring responsibilities (including childcare), literacy and language proficiency, shift work patterns, disability access, and the specific concerns and needs of minorities within communities do not act as barriers to participation.

"why is this prevention space exceptionalised and taken apart from other social harms?"[46]

Designing CE according to a 'do no harm' principle aims to avoid exposing people to additional risks through CE activities by ensuring that potential negative effects of a CE intervention on social fabric, economy, and environment are mitigated or avoided. This approach recognises that CE does not operate

---

43   For example see the ruling on Big Brother Watch and Others v. the United Kingdom (applications nos. 58170/13, 62322/14 and 24960/15), ECHR 299 (2018); HRC (2016) Observations of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on the report of the Inquiry carried out by the Committee under article 6 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention-Advance Unedited Version CRP-D/C/17/R.3. OCHCR. Geneva; HRC (2017) Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association on his follow-up mission to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland A/HRC/35/28/Add.1, http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/35/28/Add.1.
44   Greer, S. (2018) "How Might human rights contribute to countering extremism in the UK" University of Bristol Law School Blog. https://legalresearch.blogs.bris.ac.uk/2018/10/how-might-human-rights-contribute-to-countering-extremism-in-the-uk/.
45   Drawing on International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Article 19(3); European Convention on Human Rights Article 15.
46   Participant 1.

in a vacuum, and has a range of second-order (and often unintended) effects.[47] To do no harm requires a human rights sensitive situational assessment and a clearly articulated theory of change for any CE programme, policy or intervention. These two planning and design tools are vital for ensuring that necessary thresholds for intervention are met, and for understanding how and where interventions have an effect in countering extremism, and their relationships to other human rights. Maintaining a do no harm principle also offers a degree of accountability in practice as it shifts the operational focus to the intended targets of policies and programmes rather than perceived benefits to the state.

Independent, Evaluative Mechanism of Countering Extremism Policies and Programmes

At present, CE is undertaken on multiple scales, and under a variety of regulatory frameworks including the Strategy on Countering Extremism, Prevent, the Prevent Duty imposed under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, and the Channel process as revised by the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019. Our interviews suggest that, notwithstanding the multiple different frameworks and sources of countering extremism work in a formal sense, in practice when undertaking 'everyday' countering extremism practitioners do not necessarily distinguish between these, until and unless formal referrals and reporting are required. This intermingling in practice makes evaluation and monitoring of CE programmes, policies and practitioners challenging because it is not always possible

to separate out and delineate causal, correlative or independent variables/indicators/activities in CE.

Furthermore, extensive existing research, including that undertaken by civil society organisations, suggests that there is some distrust or uncertainty about the regulatory frameworks, motivating logics, reporting, transparency and rights respectfulness of countering extremism generally, and Prevent in particular.[48] This is a significant challenge given that—as our interviewees attested—co-working, trust, relationships, community engagement, and esteem are critical resources.

In part, this distrust or anxiety emanates from concerns—already outlined above—that (i) counter extremism activities result in violations of legally protected human rights, including rights to privacy, education, assembly, expression, and non-discrimination; (ii) counter-extremism activities are ineffective and have unintended societal impacts with negative effects for long-term and sustainable security; and (iii) there is a lack of political willingness meaningfully to review and revisit the current approach to countering extremism, and thus to address their potentially deleterious rights, society and security impacts.

While these programmes and approaches may well be subjected to internal review processes in sponsoring departments, particularly the Home Office, and while annual reporting (primarily statistical) is undertaken in respect of some programmes (especially Prevent),[49] there is no formal mechanism by which a commitment to accountability, transparency, and reflexivity can be

---

47   For example, earlier research has shown how framing universities' as 'radicalising spaces', and subsequent attempts to combat extremism on campuses has been linked to increases in Islamophobia, a scapegoating of faith based students societies, and fears for some families that children will be suspected of being radical/radicalized and therefore being less supportive of continuing in higher education. Please see a range of publications: https://gtr.ukri.org/project/359DFD05-5543-4A69-8A6E-F7857B16EE14; and Brown, K.E. and Saeed, T. (2015) "Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization at British Universities: Encounters and Alternatives" Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies 38 (11) pp.1952-1968; Saeed, T. (2016) Islamophobia and Securitization: religion, ethnicity and the female voice (Basginstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

48   See for example Rights Watch UK, Preventing Education? Human Rights and UK Counter-Terrorism Policy in Schools (Rights Watch UK 2016); Busher J. et. al. (2017), What the Prevent Duty Means for Schools and Colleges in England: An Analysis of Educationalists' Experiences; Muslim Council of Britain, (2015) 'Meeting between David Anderson QC and the MCB: Concerns on Prevent' https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/20150803-Case-studies-about-Prevent.pdf ; British Muslims for Secular Democracy, (2017) Democracy, Integration and Freedom in the Age of Prevent: Report; https://www.bmsd.org.uk/democracy-integration-and-freedom-in-the-age-of-prevent-report/ ; Malik, N. (2019) Radicalising Our Children An Analysis Of Family Court Cases Of British Children At Risk Of Radicalisation, 2013-2018 (Henry Jackson Society Centre on Radicalisation and Terrorism, London); Webb, E. (2017) For Our Children: An Examination of Prevent in the Curriculum, (HJS Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism Policy Paper No. 10); Sutton, R. (2016) Myths and Misunderstandings: Understanding Opposition to The Prevent Strategy, (Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism); CAGE (2018) 'Separating Families: How PREVENT Seeks the Removal of Children' https://www.cage.ngo/product/separating-families-how-prevent-seeks-the-removal-of-children-report; JUST Yorkshire, (2017) Rethinking Prevent: A Case for an Alternative Approach http://rethinkingprevent.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Rethinking-Prevent-A-Case-for-an-Alternative-Approach-v1.04.pdf; Open Society Justice Initiative (2016), Eroding Trust: The UK's PREVENT Counter-Extremism Strategy in Health and Education (Open Society Foundations https://www.justiceinitiative.org/publications/eroding-trust-uk-s-prevent-counter-extremism-strategy-health-and-education; Index on Censorship (2018), Uncomfortable but Educational: Freedom of Expression in UK Universities, https://www.indexoncensorship.org/uncomfortable-educational-freedom-expression-uk-universities/.

49   For example Home Office (2017), Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2015 to March 2016 Statistical Bulletin 23/17 (Crown Copyright, London); Home Office (2018), Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2016 to March 2017 Statistical Bulletin 06/18 (Crown Copyright, London); Home Office (2019), Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2017 to March 2018 Statistical bulletin 31/18 (Crown Copyright, London); HM Government (2015), CONTEST The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism Annual Report (Cm 9048); HM Government (2016), CONTEST The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism Annual Report (Cm 9310).

instantiated through evaluative, rights-based review.[50] We therefore propose the establishment of a standing mechanism for independent review of countering extremism.

The Principles for Independent Review

Building on research of effective review in the counter-terrorism field, and adjusting that to countering extremism, we propose that the following principles for review ought to be pursued:

(i)   Independence

The reviewer ought to be independent; she ought to be appointed in accordance with the principles and codes of public appointments, have relevant expertise (especially analytical skills, and expertise in law, human rights, or countering extremism), and be reasonably considered non-partisan.

(ii)   Mandate

The reviewer ought to have a clear mandate for a mixture of compelled periodic reviews (i.e. reviews of certain programmes or policies) and self-initiated reviews (similar to the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation). Provided she remains within the bounds of her mandate, the reviewer should be able to set her own work programme. The mandate or terms of reference should be set out clearly and published. The mandate or terms of reference might be statutory.

The mandate should include assessing and reporting on (a) the frequency and use of relevant statutory provisions, (b) prevalence and nature of countering extremism activity, (c) effectiveness assessed against the overall objective of the countering extremism strategy and against the specific objective of reviewed programmes, and (d) societal impact including human rights compliance, legality, and societal acceptance.

(iii)   Access to Information

The reviewer should have access to all relevant information and should, therefore, have appropriate security authorisations and clearance. All government and local government authorities, and relevant non-state providers, should cooperate fully with all requests for information.

(iv)   Meaningful Participation

Review ought to be premised on a policy of meaningful participation reflected in the establishment of a consultative or advisory group with community and civil society representation, empowerment of the reviewer to consult with impacted communities, and an expectation that such consultation would take place.

(v)   Publication

Reviews ought to be published within a reasonable time, with any redactions being explained in the published text. Published reviews ought to be laid before Parliament in a timely manner, and Government ought to be compelled to report to Parliament on it response to the review in a reasonable time, including indicating the action that will be taken pursuant to any recommendations made or, if no action is foreseen, explaining the decision not to implement recommendations.

Concluding Remarks

"Policy must be forward-facing; they cannot undo what has been done or give up CE"[51]

The objectives of this research paper have been to establish the benefits and challenges of existing approaches, and on the basis of these to suggest alternatives. The paper identifies that the majority of work in CE is carried out at the local and community level, and is concerned with addressing extremist narratives and ideologies. The paper further determined that the challenges and risks with the existing approaches are political and philosophical, institutional and functional. The normative and practical alternatives are rooted in human rights principles. We therefore recommend reframing CE towards human rights as both a process and an "end-state", propose a set of guidelines to achieve this, and propose the establishment of an independent evaluative review body.

---

50   See further Blackbourn, J., de Londras, F., Morgan L, (2020), Accountability and Review in the Counter-Terrorist State (Bristol: Bristol University Press), forthcoming (on file with authors), Introduction and Chapter 4.
51   Participant 2.