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Reconsidering Early Detection in Countering Radicalization by Local Frontline Professionals

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the fight against terrorism and political violence has focused more on anticipating the threats that they pose. Therefore, early detection of ideas by local professionals has become an important part of the preventive approach in countering radicalization. Frontline workers who operate in the arteries of society are encouraged to identify processes toward violent behavior at an early stage. To date, however, little is known about how these professionals take on this screening task at their own discretion. Research from the Netherlands suggests that subjective assessment appears to exist. In this article, we argue that the absence of a clear norm for preliminary judgments affects prejudice or administrative arbitrariness, which may cause side effects due to unjustified profiling.

KEYWORDS

Early detection;
radicalization; local
professional; risk assessment;
potential threats

Introduction

In recent years, many Western countries have come into contact with terrorism and political violence. According to worldwide threat assessments such as the one from the U.S. National Intelligence Service, new groups of people are prepared to use serious forms of violence, or at least propagate and facilitate them.¹ The ideological background does not really matter whether the motivation lies in political, religious, ethnic, ecological or nationalist convictions, there is increasingly open intolerance toward dissenters and distrust of government institutions.² Along with the publication of Europol's EU Terrorism Situation and Trend report (TE-SAT), Executive Director De Bolle puts it as follows: "While many extremist groups across the EU have not resorted to violence, they contribute to a climate of fear and animosity Such a climate ... may lower the threshold for some radicalized individuals to use violence against people and property."

In reaction to the developments, an approach focused on prevention has been established. The premise of preventive counter-radicalization policies is the assumption that deviant behavior and radical ideologies are often a harbinger for terrorism and political violence.³ In this context, governments have become highly concerned with early risk assessment efforts to detect the risk of committing violent offenses. In practice, it means being alert to early signs of radicalization processes. The idea behind it is not to take action when something has happened, but to insist preventively on behavioral change. Although initially, this seems an ideal course of action, this article questions on the basis of a Dutch case-study the equity of an early detection approach, with equity meaning justice according to natural law or right (freedom from bias or favoritism). More specifically, we focus on the local frontline workers who are not experts on risk assessment by profession. These are employees who provide an essential service or key public service, such as youth workers, civil servants, and community police officers. Our concerns are based on the fact that no standard is provided that can be assessed.⁴

In the discourse on fighting terrorism, the terms “radicalization” and “extremism” are widely used in relation to prevention without any clear indication of their meaning.⁵ So far, at the governmental and semi-governmental levels, there has been a great deal of variety in how these definitions are used. As an example, consider national documents such as the official Dutch Counterterrorism Strategy,⁶ or the Dutch Toolkits and Factsheets from various institutions that support municipalities, which are often presented as an example of good policy by institution like the European Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN). These documents have only recently begun to make specific reference to “extremism.” An example of this is the “Integral Approach to Terrorism” policy brief. Often, these documents only use the term “radicalization,” or the terms “radicalization” and “extremism” are used interchangeably. In an attempt to create more clarity about the local approach to radicalization, the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) endeavored to provide clarity on the norm in its introduction to the Action Program Integral Approach to Jihadism.⁷ Even then, however, only a cryptic explanation was given about how the task of “detection” is to be viewed in relation to the “norm”:

“This is no simple matter, because many personal appearances and religious behaviors overlap with non-dangerous expressions of Islam. Assuming that radicalization is a deviation from the norm, the task is to recognize this deviation as soon as possible.”⁸

However, this is only possible if the norm is known. What the “norm” actually is remains more or less undefined. It further becomes clear that the NCTV, with a clear focus on the specific ideology of Jihadism in 2014, is uncertain about the feasibility of its own vision. This can be illustrated by the document, ‘Explanation of Local Approach to Jihadism’⁹ in which the following two questions are asked: “*Is the average experience and behavior of (young) committed practicing Dutch Muslims known?*” and, “*Is it possible to identify the process of deviation towards Jihadism?*” Taking for granted that this strategic vision of the NCTV would also apply to other forms of ideology, we conclude that this lack of clear norm makes it fairly difficult to identify the grounds on which final assessments of radicalization or extremism of any type are made.

It is very possible that freedom of bias lurks because of this discretionary space. With this in mind, two major dilemmas are discussed. First, we argue that the focus on the preventive monitoring by frontline workers of citizens within an intelligence and security framework could indicate any deviation in behavior, expression, or appearance as a potential problem. This could produce biases, such as risk and estimation errors. Secondly, it should be noted that speech or behavior is not punishable unless people manifest a violent intention, incite violence, or use violence itself. We state that this should be incorporated when detecting the early signs of (violent) extremism.

Background

Early detection by local frontline workers reflects a paradigm shift in counterterrorism policy: a shift away from prosecution (solving and punishing crimes) toward risk management (identifying potentially dangerous people). After the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, European states have been making investments to increase information sharing and the monitoring of extreme behavior at the local level. Municipalities have been given joint responsibility for the early detection of potentially risky individuals. This development is in line with international strategy in the field of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), which holds that indications which could point to violent extremism should be reported as soon as possible to the local security chain.¹⁰

To instantly detect indications of radicalization and extremism, much counterterrorism policy seeks to identify ideologies that could have a destabilizing effect on society. The breadth of the approach is in the objective. Not only are acts of violence addressed, but also the cognitive processes that precede such acts. There is an explicit focus on prevention by identifying groups and individuals that appear to have radical ideas or show extreme behavior. The government’s goal is clear: radicalization, extremism, and terrorism are seen as a coherent whole, even though scientific research has established that there is no clear link.¹¹

Even though it was created as a top-down strategy, the early warning system actually takes shape at the local level. Professionals who are in daily direct contact with citizens play a vital role because they operate in the so-called arteries of society. According to the policy vision, all relevant actors must be involved in early detection—not just special investigative units, but also local governments, education organizations, social and youth workers, (mental) health professionals, and community police officers. Thus, frontline workers, such as neighborhood police officers aimed at maintaining public order, form a safety network with professionals from the care and welfare domain. Together, they must gain timely insight into potential threats. At the most basic level, risk assessment involves collecting data about a person or group to assist in making some judgment about the likelihood of an outcome or behavior. The bottom line is that social workers or teachers are asked to turn off their “feelers” and share information with police and other security services.¹² Research claims that the first steps toward developing a local approach to early detection were made in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, after the murder of Dutch filmmaker Van Gogh by a member of a homegrown Jihadist-network:

‘The city’s municipal authority sought to create an ‘early warning’ system that could identify young Muslims who were ideologically radicalizing and then intervene to stem this process. The aim was not to identify individuals who were actively preparing or engaging in acts of violence; that would be a matter for police investigation and prosecution through the regular criminal justice system. Instead, the objective was to gather information on individuals who expressed religious and political opinions that were lawful but were nevertheless perceived to indicate a risk of extremism.’¹³

In their own words, the Netherlands was at the global forefront in its preventive approach to violent extremism at the start of the Dutch co-chairmanship of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) in 2015–2019.¹⁴ In Dutch counterterrorism policy, this is referred to as the “broad approach.” The term “broad” does not refer to the large number of parties involved in the fight against terrorism. The Dutch focus on early detection became a template for policy making globally. It cultivated expertise on radicalization through relationships with intelligence and police agencies to develop an analysis of the “early warning signs” that indicate radicalization. The referral duty of frontline professionals is now mentioned in specific national policies and is thus more or less official. Suggesting that engaging frontline professionals in this activity is no less than using them as gatekeepers for a (criminal) justice system.¹⁵

Nevertheless, detection at a preemptive stage, in which there is no concrete suspicion of a criminal offense, gives frontline professionals the discretionary space to act according to their own judgment. Such was the outcome of the few studies about early detection that have been conducted among front-line practitioners thus far.¹⁶ In summary, this outcome was attributed to the following two factors: 1) a lack in the necessary development of knowledge that has taken place among local security experts and 2) the inconsistent use of concepts such as radicalization and (violent) extremism. The authors of this article have established subjectivity in preliminary risk assessment at the local level. One could say that the practical and operational side of detection is left to the moral judgment of first-line workers whose initial task is not to collect intelligence for security reasons. The activity of moral judgment in the sense of detection is that of assessing whether ideas or behavior are “rightness” or “badness.”¹⁷ However, if early detection depends on the subjective risk assessments of first-line workers, then it is also the way in which they view extremism that determines the outcome of the approach. Thus, the way in which frontline workers define the risks of (violent) extremism is linked to the effectiveness of counterterrorism policy.

As a result, we outline that ultimately, the effect of preventive policy depends on the perception of local professionals. The goal of this overview article is to substantiate that clarity is needed in terms of how different concepts are perceived by local professionals who are tasked with implementing counterterrorism, radicalization, and extremism policy. By gaining knowledge about the perspectives of frontline professionals during the initial risk-assessment stages, we take a first step toward being able to reflect upon the preventative practice of CVE-policy at the local level.

Outline

To create significant substantiation, we firstly delve into practical realities based on the literature. Secondly, an expanded critique of the main dilemmas in early-detection approaches is provided. Together, these parts form *chapter 2*: the challenges of preliminary risk assessment at the local level.

Subsequently, a case study of the Netherlands is introduced in *chapter 3*. We use the case of the Netherlands to provide an example of how local frontline workers deal with their mandate to engage in early detection. These workers are not experts on risk assessment by profession but provide essential services in social health, public order, and safety. We also discuss the side effects that accompany this practice. *Chapter 4* contains the main conclusions and a summary.

Methodology

This article is inspired by the concept of “performativity,”¹⁸ which points to a distinct relationship between the performative power of counterterrorism instruments and the effectiveness of the local approach. Performativity contends that the overall effect of the policy in question is not necessarily determined by the policy measures and their intended results as such, but much more by the way in which they are presented and perceived. This means that in order to create an equitable approach, governments, whether local or national, should focus more on the actual practice done by frontline practitioners.

This article is based on two types of research methods: literature research and open interviews. Both types of sources were originally studied for the project, “Gatekeepers of Justice”¹⁹ of the Research Group Access2Justice (Research Center of Social Innovation at Utrecht University of Applied Science) and were reviewed for this article. The outcome of that review supported our earlier conclusion that beliefs and behaviors cannot be further monitored unless a clear violent intention is expressed. This article continues that critique. The criticism of early identification as a policy approach is based on articles, books, and policy reports found through an ongoing Google Scholar search. The main keywords are ‘early detection’, ‘radicalization’, ‘violent extremism’, ‘local professional’, ‘risk assessment’, ‘potential threats’ and ‘justice.’ Promising references found on Google Scholar were followed up. Discussion of literature has also arisen from the authors’ research networks. Therefore, knowledge and expertise are also built up through outreach activities.

The case study on the Netherlands is based on interviews with youth workers (N = 18), municipal officials (N = 15), and community police officers (N = 22) during the period of 2016–2019. The main participants were selected through snowballing.²⁰ Respondents were initially approached directly at conferences (e.g., RAN-meetings or via social media calls). We note that working in a safety framework entails confidence, dilemmas and uncertainties for frontline professionals, who are often not experts in risk interpretation. For that reason, a bottom-up approach was chosen for the execution of the studies. Respondents (total N = 55) were approached personally and not brought in from the higher levels through the organization for which they worked. In this way, we were able to build trust. Professionals were able to talk freely and share opinions, visions, and experiences with us.

The challenges of preliminary risk assessment at the local level

When discussing a preventative early detection approach within counterterrorism, it should be noted that the motto has shifted away from a “War on Terrorism” to a “Battle of Ideas.”²¹ Unfortunately, there is often no consensus on which ideas should be viewed as problematic. Potential threats posed by ideologies take place in the so-called pre-crime phase, in which no actual unlawful behavior has occurred.²² In this phase, prevention is concerned mostly with the symbolic arena as indications of radicalization are sought in ideas, expressions, or deviant attitudes. In this way, law enforcement becomes anticipatory.²³ But in all honesty, no one—not even experts in terrorism and political

violence—can say for sure when someone actually poses a threat until the point at which the individual engages in concrete activities.

Thus, terrorism researchers state that it is not easy to capture how one is to recognize and assess signs of radicalization processes in words, laws, and methods.²⁴ Particularly, when there is no clear evidence of preparation for an attack or incitement to hatred, evaluating the risk that an individual poses is a matter of personal judgment. This is by definition a subjective judgment because the degree of radicalism or extremity that we attribute to someone turns out to be rather personal.²⁵ Concerns are based on the fact that arbitrariness in judgment can lead to increased levels of stigmatization and discrimination, as well as criminalization of certain undesired behavior.

Scholars²⁶ have thus pointed out that in such subjective risk assessment, the normative legitimacy²⁷ of preventive counterterrorism practices is immediately apparent because it could lead to administrative arbitrariness and profiling.²⁸ It may even criminalize certain “suspect communities.”²⁹ Such practice places pressure on the equity of early detection because the initial risk weightings rely too strongly on “gut feelings” or intuition, while legal capabilities do not matter as much. In addition to the side effects of profiling, the state of being labeled a threat by public officials without clear indicators creates strong negative experiences in both the individuals and groups that are subject to these monitoring processes. The principles of equity and justice are thus particularly relevant. The primary reason is that prejudice and arbitrariness harm the core values of democratic society, which is based on the principle of equity (according to UN Resolution 18/6,³⁰ a democratic and equitable order requires the equitable participation of all, without any discrimination, in domestic and global decision making).

Additionally, it should be emphasized that the United Nations Development Programme³¹ highlights inequality, injustice, and the violation of human rights as drivers that can result in violent extremist action. This correlation is also reflected in basic criminology knowledge, which has shown over time that feelings of injustice and unfairness are central factors in extreme violence in general.³² In this way, a lack of equity could establish an important breeding ground for extremism.³³ In daily practice, legal boundaries are tested or crossed in the name of safety and security.³⁴ Following this statement, we suggest delving into the two main dilemmas of early detection at the local level.

Dilemma #1: Prejudice

A frontline professional must be on the lookout for the first signs of deviant attitude, but as mentioned, no clear framework is provided for such a preliminary assessment, and it is even questionable whether such a framework could exist at all. When discussing risk assessment, it is important to realize that people evaluate risk from their own perspectives.³⁵ In the case of extreme behavior, one is particularly inclined to evaluate others based on the decision maker’s own viewpoint. This is what social scientists and psychologists call “moral judgment,” which entails the consideration of (professional) values and norms.³⁶

Morality strongly depends on the dominant culture and is influenced by public debate.³⁷ Thus, we can state that the environment—whether it is social or political discourse—strongly influences the way in which a local professional experiences issues faced. Moreover, people are highly attuned to information that confirms their ideas and tend to interpret new information to confirm their own assumptions, regardless of how competent they are.³⁸ People exhibit this bias when gathering information selectively or when interpreting information subjectively. This reflex is known as “confirmation bias”—the preference for confirming existing beliefs.³⁹

Dilemma #2: Arbitrariness

Although working together at the intersection of care, welfare, public order, and safety sounds efficient and logical, it also creates an area of tension. Preventive monitoring of society is a policy concept known as the “community targeted approach.”⁴⁰ This approach focuses on early recognition of processes that could lead to possible violence in some cases. Although called prevention, it is still in

fact a repressive approach—that is, communities are targeted for gathering intelligence and enforcement activities driven by the security priorities of the state.⁴¹ Frontline professionals must be on the lookout for the early signs of radicalization, but again, there is no clear framework of what the terminology entails. And although there are risk-assessment tools⁴² to screen attitudes, there is also a clear disadvantage: these assessments are time—and resource—intensive and require a reasonable understanding of risk assessment and violence literature as well as appropriate training to assure a proper understanding of all aspects of the specific tool.⁴³ For this matter they are mainly developed for police and justice institutions. The result of the situation is that these tools are hardly used by frontline practitioners such as youth workers, civil servants, and community constables, who operate preventively in the area between social welfare and early detection of radicalization processes.

One may frame the problem within concepts and terminology from screening in public health.⁴⁴ Specifically, preventive monitoring of society can be seen as a screening test applied to a population, where the outcome is the classification of a subject as either likely or unlikely to be at risk. Here, we focus on screening that is performed before the symptoms of high-risk status emerge. Unlike what happens in traditional screening tests, however, classification as being at risk cannot be followed by further examination that determines exactly whether the subject truly has the condition of being at risk, so there is potential for additional mistakes. Such a practice increases the risk of so-called “false positives” (i.e., people who are identified as potentially risky when they would never engage in violence in all likelihood). Along these lines, there is also a risk of “false negatives” (i.e., people who are not considered dangerous but eventually do engage in violence). Both outcomes have negative implications.

The case study of the Netherlands

The realization of the importance of frontline workers’ perspective gave rise to a project within the Research Group Access2Justice.⁴⁵ In three exploratory studies conducted between 2016–2019, frontline professionals were interviewed about their role in the early detection of violent extremism among young people in the Netherlands.⁴⁶ These studies are overviewed in the following.

Mapping the field

In our study, we focused solely on the policy addressing radicalization processes. We note that the very definition of being at risk due to radicalism is problematic since a person may be at risk today but never act violently. Frontline professionals are tasked with trying to determine whether a person would perform an undesirable act if left alone. The Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security defines this state as related to the “broad spectrum of radical ideology that poses a threat to the democratic rule of law and the safety of citizens.”⁴⁷ This definition is relevant for the early-detection task set for frontline workers, but it is still quite vague. It raises other questions: when is one’s belief system a threat to the rule of law or other citizens? The necessity of using clear and specific terminology is pointed out in the few studies about early detection that have been conducted among frontline practitioners so far.⁴⁸ For one thing, screening at a preemptive stage, in which there is no concrete suspicion of a criminal offense, gives frontline professionals the discretionary space to act according to their own judgment, which might lead to excesses. In summary, this outcome was attributed to the following factors: 1) a lack in the necessary development of knowledge that has taken place among local security experts, 2) the inconsistent use of concepts such as radicalization and (violent) extremism, and 3) doubts about the ability to accurately assess potential risk at such a level.

In Dutch policy, the distinction between radicalization as a behavioral process and the use of violence is often not clearly made. We start from the assumption that this distinction is often difficult to make based on the absence of indicators for risk that are available to local security professionals. In what follows, we map out how local professionals perceive radicalization within this ambiguous field. Therefore, in our open interviews with local welfare and security professionals, we focused on the risk

assessments made at the earliest stage of detection by youth workers (N = 18), civil servants (N = 15), and community police officers (N = 22). To understand their performance, we used the following two research questions:

- (1) What criteria do local professionals use to determine whether someone forms a potential risk?
- (2) How do local professionals substantiate their assessments of radicalization processes?

Outcomes

What criteria do local professionals use to determine whether someone forms a potential risk?

All interviewed respondents responsible for public order and social welfare at the local level indicated that they had taken a course or received training to improve their detection of radicalization. Nevertheless, this should not be interpreted to mean that they are capable of fully identifying particular ideologies. A number of respondents confirmed as much. The following reaction from a respondent shows how elusive ideology can be: “You can try to understand it, but that does not mean you will succeed.” Moreover, many of the courses and trainings that these local security professionals received are offered by commercial parties and are subject to little oversight. This means that it is not clear whether and how these non-governmental experts and the content of the course are evaluated.⁴⁹

When interviewees responded to the question, “When is someone a threat to society?” they almost immediately began to list actions that could be classified as unlawful, such as the intention to leave the country to participate in terrorist activity, recruiting for terrorist groups, or preparing an attack or incidence of physical violence. That makes sense because these are indicators of a threat for which concrete evidence can often be found. Moreover, these actions are ones that the national government in the Netherlands first targeted using administrative measures (by revoking passports or banning individuals from certain areas, as was done in 2017 to a Salafist imam⁵⁰). The responsibility for implementing some of these laws, such as the Temporary Law on Administrative Measures for Counterterrorism,⁵¹ lies with the mayor of the municipality. Most municipalities in which we conducted interviews had experienced cases that fit within a particular legal framework. The interviewees also spoke of famous cases that had received media attention for their use of criminal law to prosecute threats. It is not surprising that most of the civil servants for public order and security who participated in this study focused on detecting potentially criminal behavior, which is what they are familiar with after all.

However, when we asked the interviewees about the “ideology” or “ideas” that potentially form a threat, the explanation about how a threat can be identified came to a halt. Here, the interviewees replied that the indicators of such potentially threatening ideologies or ideas are abstract and do not rely on concrete actions. As one respondent explained, “If you only have a signal about someone’s attitude (for example, in the classroom, an author’s addition), it is difficult to classify it as innocent or not. Where is the line?” A number of respondents provided examples of signals they received relating to “harsh” or “hostile” language. They took these signals into account in their assessment in order to avoid any risk of missing important signals. The following statement provides further explanation: “You receive a report on a youth who showed ‘aggressive behavior’ in his language use.” What exactly “aggressive” means in this context, the frontline worker (in this case a civil servant) could not clarify. His only answer was: “That is difficult because youth say so much nowadays. I think they themselves often do not even know what they mean.”

When we probed the respondents further about ideas and expressions that could form a threat to society, almost all of them respondents provided examples of cases that the “weighing team” had discussed. After we explicitly asked the respondents, it became clear that most of these examples did not involve verbal threats of violence. Such threats occur when language is used to incite hate, intolerance, or antidemocratic behavior or seeks to limit the freedom of others. The law specifies that such language can be qualified as an unlawful call to violent action, such as an incitement to hate or discrimination. The respondents’ examples, however, generally related to verbal expressions that

could be considered criticism of another or another's group or to expressions that were otherwise disturbing. One respondent provided an example of a group of boys who had said that God would punish homosexuals because they are "dirty" people. A number of respondents cited the justifying of attacks on Westerners as an example of a hostile attitude.

In the determination of whether a particular radicalization process is developing toward extremism, a person under investigation can provide determinative information. The answer to the question of what is going on can be found in conversations with the individual who is suspected of posing a threat and with the people in that person's environment. Most interviewees from the study on the civil servants noted this approach. These local security professionals felt it important to ascertain the stage of development that the individual being investigated was in. In the municipalities where these professionals worked, threat assessment thus included a conversation with the youth under investigation. This happened largely at the security professional's own initiative. At first sight, this seems to be a good approach, but for this approach to succeed, the security professional must have sufficient knowledge and expertise in conducting conversations about ideological and existential issues.

How do local professionals substantiate their assessments of the radicalization processes?

When we asked the interviewees to reflect on their responses, about one-third of them realized that the ideology-based cases that they had provided as examples were actually not instances of incitement to violence or showed indications of willingness to use violence. They seemed to become (or be) aware of the fact that most cases dealt with those who likely did not have any intention to actually engage in violence despite engaging in hostile discourse. Those who did not reach this insight by themselves were confronted with it. The result was that most respondents experienced this realization as a (significant) dilemma. They asked themselves whether the hostile language that they observed was always necessarily a threat to the security of others. In other words, when does aggressive speech or an aggressive attitude also involve the intention or willingness to use violence? What is the actual risk to democracy?

Upon reflection, a number of respondents implied that they understood that their interpretation of early detection policy might conflict with human or constitutional rights, such as the right to freedom of expression. However, their impressions seemed to be based more on common sense (also called "folk wisdom")⁵² than on an actual understanding of the content of fundamental rights. The following answer given by one respondent illustrates this perspective: "Everyone has the right to their opinion, of course. You are allowed to think what you want in the Netherlands." Such responses seem to indicate that legal knowledge about the freedom of expression is incomplete among local civil servants responsible for security. As mentioned earlier, human rights laws give individuals significant freedom to make their opinions known without any interference from the state. This freedom is not absolute, however. When an individual engages in hate speech or an explicit incitement to violence, the government may intervene. In the Netherlands, for example, incitement to hate and violence is criminalized under Article 137d of the Dutch Criminal Code.⁵³

During the interviews, we also learned that a large majority look for behavioral changes among youths when trying to assess abstract indicators such as ideology or ideas. Such changes can be precursors to extremism. The local professionals indicated that they paid particular attention to whether the youth had recently been involved in incidents such as dropping out of school, coming into contact with the police, engaging in fights with peers, causing a nuisance in the neighborhood, or experiencing family problems. To investigate whether such incidents had occurred, the professionals collected information from different municipal network partners by asking whether the partner knew of a particular individual. As one respondent described it, "You kind of do a check of the plusses and minuses." He said he meant this literally: "The social authorities give the person a 'plus' if they think that the reason the youth is known to them could lead to concerns about radicalization. The more plusses on the list, the bigger the risk someone poses."

In evaluating the assessment process, we noted that little to no attention is paid to the possibility that behavioral change could indicate the natural age-related process of identity development. While the phenomenon of an "identity crisis" is sometimes referenced, it is not clearly explained how one

should assess the “radicalization stage” of the youth involved undergoing such an identity crisis, or what part “ideology developments” play. It would be important to know how to recognize particular stages in the process of ideological change, as well as whether someone has an open or closed mind regarding democratic core values such as freedom, solidarity, and equality.⁵⁴ The interviewed local security professionals, however, seemed to not be mindful of the fact that extremism is often linked to a mind that is closed to other views, which is a characteristic that makes one intolerant. This fits with the overall observation that these frontline workers have difficulty making explicit the terms, phenomena, and concepts with which they work, which forces them to rely heavily on assumptions.

In the end, all respondents admitted rather explicitly that their risk assessment is based on intuition. This shows parallels to the answers to question (1) regarding the criteria that local security professionals use to determine whether someone represents a potential risk, as set out in the previous section. In that context, we saw the extent to which one’s “gut feeling” is relied upon in deciding whether an individual represents a potential threat. Upon reflection, it appeared that most local professionals rely on the importance of finding the “best person to do the job” instead of on looking for “best practices” to fulfill their specific assignment in early detection. Although this is a realistic view of early detection practice (as this practice is not evidence-based), the lack of checks on their judgments and decision making means that cognitive bias could be influencing their assessments.

Current scholarship on the influence of cognitive bias on risk assessment shows that biases such as authority bias and overestimating one’s own ability often lead to significant under- or overestimation of security threats. Thus, the risk assessment of extremism among youth is vulnerable to errors in judgment. After all, when assessing whether someone is a potential threat to democracy, the assessor considers whether damage might be caused. Numerous experiments show that in such assessments, even professionals and specialists make both incidental and structural errors.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Starting from the concept of “performativity,” this article outlined that the effectiveness of the local approach to prevent terrorism and political violence depends on the views of the people who have to do the work. This means that in our studies we focused on what actually happens in daily practice in the Dutch context. The outcome of the “Gatekeepers of Justice” project pointed out that frontline professionals mainly rely on personal “moral” judgments when on the lookout for potentially risky people.⁵⁶ To quote some of the interviewees, they rely on gut feeling or intuition. Besides the subjective judgment that this entails, such practice poses a risk of errors of estimation. If this is the case, the effectiveness of the policy is under pressure.

In conclusion, despite the good intentions to prevent terrorism and political violence early on, the bottom line is that non-expert frontline workers mostly seem to make personal assessments that are hard to substantiate. This seems to be all the more true for possible threats that could arise from ideas and deviant attitude expressed in the so-called pre-crime phase. In the end, no one can say for sure when someone actually poses a risk until the point at which the individual engages in concrete activities. The problem with this practice is that the focus on screening of citizens could identify any deviation in behavior, expression, and appearance as a potential problem. This immediately makes the policy controversial because it could create administrative arbitrariness.

Nevertheless, there is a substantial lack of sufficient empirical research in which operational and effectiveness of counterterrorism is evaluated. Thus, we do not really know how preventive policy is implemented, let alone know if or how it works. We must bear in mind that this can lead to stigmatization, discrimination, and unjustified profiling. Such cases undermine the principle of equality upon which democracy is based. Therefore, our conclusion is that sufficient understanding of the norms underlying human rights, citizenship rights, and tolerance should be consistently present in local counter-radicalization policy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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