CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Families, Communities & Social Care Working Group meeting
28 & 29 May 2024, Lisbon, Portugal

Trust-building and the context of the P/CVE practitioner

Key outcomes

On 28 and 29 May, the last RAN Practitioners meeting of the Families, Communities & Social Care Working Group took place in Lisbon (Portugal). The meeting brought together social care professionals, youth workers and other professionals who work in the field of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE).

During this meeting, practitioners explored the challenges they encounter to build a trustful relationship with their target audience, reflected on their own perspectives and their unconscious biases towards the people they work with, and exchanged on inspiring trust-building approaches on a personal, organisational and macro level.

In short, conversations included the following points:

- Reflect on (the impact of) unconscious bias. Everybody has unconscious biases and they can serve people in many ways. For P/CVE practitioners it is however also helpful if they are: 1) able to self-reflect on their own biases and stay open-minded; 2) aware of the impact of their own worldview and the perception of their target group; and 3) able to reflect on their role in the system/community they are working in/with.

- The following recommendations on different levels can contribute to a solid ground for a trust-building process.

  o Personal level: Be authentic and open-minded and create a reciprocal relationship. Keep in mind that empathy is not necessarily the same as sympathy.

  o Organisational level: Make sure an environment is created where there is a safe space for discussions with your peers or colleagues, that mistakes and risk-taking (to some extent) are allowed, and that practitioners' safety and resilience are protected.

  o Macro level: Keep in mind that the target audience may feel the impact of the public discourse. Also take into account your own role on the macro level and be aware that, for example, your (social) media presence can influence the relationship with individuals.

This paper outlines the highlights of the discussions during this meeting, followed by key recommendations, relevant practices and suggestions for further reading.

Trust-building

For first-line practitioners in the field of P/CVE, a trustful relationship with the individuals they support has always been at the core of their efforts and activities. It is both a goal in itself and a means to carry out P/CVE strategies. Trust-building is an essential part of relationship-building in general ([1]). Trust however is not a given, especially in a field where individuals and communities they work with might feel mistrusted and under surveillance by local and state authorities. The trust-building process has become more challenging while navigating times of global crises, economic hardship, and polarisation fuelled by conspiracy narratives or disinformation, in which uncertainty prevails for a large amount of people. It has led to a growing distrust towards institutions and those who represent them. The process of building trust goes hand in hand with several challenges for practitioners who aim to create the right conditions to build trust, such as the following.

- **In the past few years, distrust towards institutions and the judiciary system has increased.** Practitioners may be viewed as representatives of these distrusted entities, complicating trust-building.

- **Sharing information about yourself.** While disclosing information about yourself can foster a reciprocal relationship, practitioners also have to maintain their own boundaries. Knowing when and what to disclose can be challenging in some situations.
- **Families and individuals might feel ashamed of the challenges they encounter.** This shame can hinder clients from sharing information with practitioners.

- **In addition, the client may expect the practitioner to keep every secret**, while the practitioner has an obligation to report crimes or child endangerment, for example.

- **Trust-building might sometimes feel complex when practitioners belong to different cultural, religious or marginalised groups.** In some cases, practitioners are perceived as outsiders or even adversaries and accused of "brainwashing" them.

- **Investing time is essential when establishing trust.** Trust is not immediately granted during an initial encounter; rather, it is developed over time through ongoing interactions. This is especially the case when there is significant distrust at the start due to a variety of reasons. Time is an ongoing challenge for practitioners, because the resources are often not available.

The context of the practitioner

Taking into account the perspective of the individual

Investing time, clear communication regarding roles and agenda, and taking into account the perspectives of the individual are important in trust building ([2]). This does not mean you have to agree with their perspectives or ideas, as stated by one of the practitioners in this meeting: "Empathy for your client is not the same as sympathy for the ideas or behaviour of your client." It is however helpful if practitioners are able to self-reflect on their own biases and stay open-minded. The following section will therefore dive deeper into the practitioners' discussions on this theme.

The practitioner's own context

Everyone has biases about other people. Unconscious biases are a natural part of human cognition and can influence decisions and interactions in subtle ways. Our brains allow us to make very quick judgements based on past experiences and societal norms. On the other hand, unconscious biases can also lead to unintended discrimination or favouritism, even when people have conscious intentions to be "fair". Completely eliminating unconscious bias is

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([1]) Haugstvedt, H. (2020). Trusting the mistrusted: Norwegian social workers' strategies in preventing radicalization and violent extremism. *Journal for Deradicalization, 19*, 149-184.
https://www.socialestabiliteit.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2020/05/01/paper-trusting-the-mistrusted
([2]) Ibid.

thus not possible, but also might not be necessary. While it is difficult to control our first thought, it is achievable to manage our second and third responses. A number of different unconscious biases are:

- **affinity bias:** having a preference for people who are like you;
- **confirmation bias:** looking for information that confirms our own beliefs and ignoring information that doesn't; and
- **group think:** making decisions to keep group harmony and avoid conflict.

As for all people, practitioners working in P/CVE also have unconscious biases. From a community policing perspective, for example, practitioners mention that they have had negative interactions with certain individuals or specific communities, which may lead to seeing them as the source of the problems. Sometimes they experience a lack of resources on the organisational level to also create positive or alternative perspectives. Other practitioners underlined that violent right- or violent left-wing extremism is sometimes overlooked due to their own political backgrounds or preferences. Unconscious biases can therefore also play a role in daily practice of the P/CVE practitioner.

Tips for reflecting on unconscious biases

- **Challenge stereotypes, traditions and assumptions.** For example, try to notice them in others in order to become aware of your own.
- **Reflect on your own position and perspective and how this may be impacting your work.** The text boxes on the last page outline a number of example questions and assignments that can be used individually or with colleagues.
- **Actively look for alternative perspectives.** For example, it may help to spend time with people who are different from ourselves.
- **Be aware of intersectionality.** Each person has different elements in their identity that affect them. Also, various forms of inequalities (such as gender, class, sexuality and ethnic background) operate together and exacerbate each other. Being aware of the intersectionality of different identities is essential to take another person's perspective and therefore important for counselling.

Relevant practices

Example assignment I: the story of my name

Think about the following questions or discuss them with a colleague.
- Who chose your name? Do you know why they picked that name?
- Does your name have a meaning? What language is it in?
- Is it a nickname? Why do people call you that?
- Do people ever mispronounce your name? How come?
- Are there any stories connected to your name?

Reflect on the answers.
- Reflect on the story you recounted of your name. If you have never thought about it, it is also something you can reflect on.
- Does it help to better understand who you are today? The role you play at work, in the community and to the people you work with? How do they respond to you, your name?
- What might it say about your gender, family, class, age, race?
- Might this have had any impact on subconscious choices you made?   **Created by ConnectFutures (2024)**

Assignment II: role play with P/CVE scenarios

The following assignment helps practitioners to explore their own position and context and the possible influence on their work in the field of P/CVE. It is an assignment of ConnectFutures. These scenarios drafted by ConnectFutures can be found in the attachment on the last page.

Step 1. Preparation. Make trios and appoint one person as the practitioner, one person as the client and one person as the observer. Choose one of the scenarios and get into character.

Step 2. Role play and reflection. Play it for 5-10 minutes. Then reflect together. Then switch to a new scenario with a new division of roles!

Possible questions for the reflection:

- Did you have a picture in your head of what the client looked like? How?
- What were the similarities or differences in how you and another group played a role?
- Did you find similarities between these scenarios and the work you do? Is there anything that you were not familiar with?
- In what ways did considering your worldview help you?
- In what ways did considering your worldview hinder you?
- How did you use your worldview to build trust?
- Would you have responded any differently if you were not engaging as a practitioner but as "yourself"? Do you ever find these things to be in conflict?
- What was the most difficult thing about this activity?
- Is there anything you saw somebody do that you would like to adopt into your practice?
- What would you have done if you had more time?
- Is it important to think about your own context for your work and why?

Created by ConnectFutures (2024)

Recommendations

Recommendations for the P/CVE practitioner (individual level)

- **First impressions count.** Try to make the client feel comfortable and seen.

- **Manage expectations, establish "ground rules" and a way of working together, so everyone is on the same page.**

- **Manage expectations by explaining what you can and cannot achieve.** Sharing what you can do can become very concrete when discussing all steps your client can take. You can for example show them how the circle of change ([3]) works, and where they find themselves in this circle. Afterwards, you can form concrete steps to get to the next step. Sharing your limits is important, for example be honest about what kinds of issues you need to report.

- **Know your own privileges.** As stated earlier in this paper, it is essential to understand your own context and privileges in relation to your client. This forces an awareness of your own context and

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([3]) For more information on the circle of change, see: https://socialworktech.com/2012/01/09/stages-of-change-prochaska-diclemente/

subsequent bias and allows you to understand the perspective of the client. Think about the power relation within the relationship with your client and do not start "lecturing".

- **Make sure to meet each other in a safe space where people feel like they can speak freely.**

- **Be authentic.** This also means being relatable, open-minded, human and honest, kind and compassionate. This last point does not mean that you have to sympathise with but rather to understand the perspective of the other person.

- **Be aware of the body language that you use and that your client uses.** Consciously using your body language can be an effective way to build a trustful relationship. You can, for example, use facial expressions to show you are open and listening. Effectively reading facial expressions can also help you see cues and pick up on cues.

- **Be transparent and open, but don't offer private information.** It can be smart to disclose some information about yourself to establish trust or to find common ground and interests. However, keep in mind that disclosing things about yourself is not the same as sharing a lot of private information, such as where you live. A practitioner shared the value of this reciprocal relationship: "I found a connection with someone when I was talking about racism and how I experienced this myself."

- **A trauma-informed approach might be needed in some cases.** Trauma and stigma can affect help-seeking behaviour and openness to care providers. This is an approach that acknowledges the pervasive nature of trauma and advocates for understanding, respecting and appropriately responding to the effects of trauma at all levels and across multiple settings. For working with trauma, specialised skills and training are needed.

- **Engage role models and the community.** Don't do it alone: use a role model that your client can look up to or the community and people around them, such as teachers and family.

- **Have a person-centred approach instead of a solution-centred approach.** Put the person you are helping at the centre of your interventions, take into account their context and needs. Do not just focus on getting to certain results, and be patient. Sometimes things take a bit longer than expected.

- **Sometimes it is necessary to try and test some things: some things work out, others do not.** The focus in a lot of discourses is on security, therefore it can be difficult to take risks. However, sometimes it is necessary to do so. Carefully discuss these risks in the organisations (see below).

Recommendations on the organisational level

P/CVE practitioners need to stay authentic while their personal, organisational and political environments may be constantly changing. Therefore, this meeting did not only explore the recommendations for practitioners on a personal level, it also explored what is needed on an organisational and a macro level that helps practitioners to build a solid relationship.

As an organisation it is necessary to prevent practitioners from feeling lonely and overwhelmed. Therefore, it is important for organisations to provide clinical supervision, peer work for practitioners and opportunities to decompress. This also means investing in a safe culture in which disagreeing with each other is okay. Such an environment may lead to less group think and creates a safe environment. This is particularly important since trust-building is a process that sometimes includes making mistakes or taking risks: Allow the practitioners to make mistakes and give them the benefit of the doubt. As a manager, show that you trust your staff, but also make sure that you promote practitioners to put their own safety and resilience first. This also means to be transparent beforehand with the organisational partners on questions such as "when do you share information with security actors?" Carry out a foundation of awareness raising and training on skills among P/CVE workers. Explore different possibilities, such as role playing and invest in a structure that allows for creativity.

All of the above is only possible when "you practice what you preach" and when the organisation has clear organisational goals. This includes being aware of the social media presence, but also entails good planning and

preparation. Individuals usually trust the practitioners they work with, but once a career of a professional ends, how will the rest of the organisation take up this activity? Values should be adopted in the entire team and organisation. Also discuss the "risk appetite" that both professionals individually and the organisation as a whole is willing to take. This includes a discussion on questions such as: What level of risk are we open to? If something is going wrong, what is our fallback position? Is this plan clear for the people working in the organisation? Additionally, to make sure that your organisation is efficient, working methods should be continuously monitored and evaluated.

Recommendations on the macro level

We live in a society with multiple crises and a global loss of trust. Facebook, TikTok, memes and emotional content are dominating the media. There is a commercialisation of distrust and hate taking place in public and social media and also political leadership can have an influence. Rather than being compassionate, some citizens are mimicking that rhetoric and everybody seems to pick some sort of side. For a practitioner working with individuals, that impact is felt.

- The public and political discourses have a large influence on the experience of the clients and as such a lot of clients of P/CVE practitioners experience (perceived or real) discrimination. They bring up societal developments in discussions with P/CVE practitioners, such as the war in Gaza. Possible recommendations for practitioners can be to ask questions about how they experience these issues, but other clients might want more from this. As one client told a practitioner: "I need 'arguing', hear other perspectives, in order to learn more about politically sensitive issues."

Take your own role on the macro level into account and be aware that, for example, your social media presence can influence the relationship with individuals. The scenarios and landscape that the community of practitioners is creating online is also out there among clients: "When I talk on TV about certain issues, my clients also comment on this in discussions."

Further reading

- RAN H&SC-POL Conclusion Help the Helper – Safeguarding the well-being of mental health and social care practitioners, online meeting 25-26 March 2020.
- RAN LOCAL online meeting: How to prevent and mitigate anti-government extremism at the local level? Restoring normality, rebuilding trust and networks at the local level, online, 06-10 March 2023.
- RAN FC&S meeting on How can P/CVE practitioners address the effects of perceived (institutional, social, interpersonal) discrimination?, Zagreb 22-23 November 2022.
- Haugstvedt, H. (2020). Trusting the mistrusted: Norwegian social workers' strategies in preventing radicalization and violent extremism. *Journal for Deradicalization, 19*, 149-184. https://www.socialestabiliteit.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2020/05/01/paper-trusting-the-mistrusted

Attachment: inspiring practice with example scenarios (⁴)

SCENARIO 1

A parent concerned about a phone call they received from their daughter's school, regarding her newfound interest in Islam.

- The parent tells the practitioner that their teenage daughter was distressed by the current conflict in the Middle East. They have helped her by supporting her with her wishes to attend protests and learn more about activism.
- Their daughter has also become more interested in Islam. The parent is not religious, so supports their daughter by taking her to the mosque and speaking to Muslim friends.
- A teacher from the daughter's school contacts the parent, informing them that their daughter has expressed some extremist views.

The parent needs some guidance on how to approach a conversation with the school.

SCENARIO 2

A teenage boy who has not left his house for several weeks, preferring to play video games at home. His guardian has expressed concerns about far-right racist jokes he has been posting online.

- The teenage boy is an avid gamer and member of several online gaming communities.
- The boy's guardian has reported some memes and jokes that the boy has shared on various platforms. They are often about Holocaust denial, and have far-right, neo-Nazi undertones.
- When confronted the boy has expressed they are merely jokes that he and online friends share.
- He experienced extensive bullying at school growing up.

The objective of the session is to help the boy to understand the benefits of going outside, the risks of online echo chambers and the consequences of sharing hateful content.

SCENARIO 3

The grandparent of a young boy who has acted out violently towards a female student.

- The boy, aged 8, has been disrespectful to female staff and female classmates.
- He spends a significant amount of time watching TikTok content from influencers who express extreme anti-feminist and misogynistic views.
- Recently, the boy slapped a female classmate in the face. When asked why, he has implied that he believes she speaks too much.
- He lives with his grandparents who are deeply religious and hold similar anti-feminist views. They are reluctant to work with the school as they believe that their grandson has been targeted and that the state is using schools to weaken boys and men.

The objective of the session is to encourage the grandparent to work with the school to develop a behaviour plan for their grandson.

(⁴) All scenarios are produced by ConnectFutures (UK) – Savannah Hanson. More information about this assignment can be found in this paper under sub-header 'Assignment II'.