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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN digital small-scale expert meeting

27 June 2023

Ethical guidelines in P/CVE

Key outcomes

On 27 June, a small-scale expert meeting was held online to explore a topic that all preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) practitioners grapple with: ethics. In this meeting, 10 experts from the fields of ethics, youthwork, education, prisoner counselling, rehabilitation and multi-agency cooperation joined the discussion. These P/CVE practitioners continually balance moral values such as privacy, transparency, (personal) security and human rights. Ethics is the system of all moral values combined. Ethical questions arise because practitioners, being human like everyone else, uphold different values for different situations. And every situation is indeed different, especially in the field of P/CVE. There is no single simple answer to a given ethical question: everything in P/CVE is context dependent. Meeting participants discussed the different contexts in which they carry out their work, the ethical questions they have encountered and the personal and institutional approaches they have used or potentially would use.

By engaging in discussions on ethics in such forums, P/CVE practitioners lay the groundwork for a better understanding of what is deemed 'fair' treatment for themselves, their colleagues, their clients and their organisations. The following five outcomes are significant.

1. **A discussion about ethics should be held before anything else.** Often, ethics are not discussed at all — and when they are, this is typically after an intervention or approach has been initiated. Ultimately, holding continual ethics discussions helps create an environment open to social change and richer future policy development.
2. **Ethics discussions and support should be informed by practical wisdom and institutionalised** in order to be effective. Today, even though many organisations broadcast organisational values such as non-discrimination and accountability, the establishment of these values is, in many cases, still a top-down process of generic values that are difficult to implement in practical, concrete situations.
3. **The *How* question, rather than the *What* question is the basis for every ethics discussion, illustrating** the distinction between simply having guidelines and implementing ethics in P/CVE work on the ground. For example, ethical guidelines can propose the promotion of a 'safe space'. That is the *What*. The ethical question P/CVE practitioners need to ask themselves and discuss is *how* they plan to promote and instrumentalise such 'safe spaces' in their daily work.
4. **A discussion about ethics is a discussion about establishing trust.** For P/CVE, we know that a multi-agency approach works. However, we should also strive to establish a level of trust between the different agencies involved — not just with respect to information-sharing, but also as regards ethically evaluating each other's actions and reasoning.
5. It is important to keep in mind that **ethics are culturally dependent.** What is deemed 'fair' in a security agency will most likely be different in a prison rehabilitation facility or in an education setting.

Discussion highlights

The discussion focused on the various practical scenarios and situations participants encounter. Most identified the tension between their personal beliefs and their professional responsibilities (e.g. led by protocols and organisational values) as one of the biggest ethical dilemmas, thus illustrating a strenuous dynamic between professional and personal core values/levels.

Use practical wisdom

The participants talked extensively about the importance of settings and communicating about and adhering to individual boundaries in their daily work, e.g. when confronted with a client who has displayed or is suspected of distressing (criminal) behaviour such as rape. In some cases, practitioners are reluctantly obliged (by law, or because they work for a government agency) to continue treating such clients. In other cases, practitioners have more liberty to choose the type of clients with whom they want to engage but lack the organisational support to discuss or evaluate situations they are uncomfortable with. In all cases, participants agreed that some form of dialogue (e.g. a discussion on ethics) amongst peers, institutionalised or not, would benefit them greatly. Practical wisdom, or **phronesis**, is seen as the key to ethical decision-making, especially in an inherently fluid field of practice such as P/CVE, which involves a lot of unknowns combined with a real element of risk involved.

Rebuild trust

Another ethical dilemma mentioned frequently was the willingness to act in a potentially unsecure situation but lacking the trust in partner agencies to do so. In particular, practitioners described situations in which they were asked to share information with other agencies. In most cases, this involved requests for a client's or student's or their own personal information, without being made aware of the reasons for asking or what the information would be used for — even though they were keen to cooperate. Participants considered that lack of trust amongst agencies in multi-agency collaboration would be a likely result of this dynamic. More importantly, it hinders information-sharing and rules out the option to evaluate the ethics behind the work of the involved agencies or practitioners.

Adopt ethics in multi-agency collaboration

The participants discussed another dilemma: sharing or using 'soft' information about an individual, without the proper legal conditions being met or without the proper protocol being followed within a multi-agency framework. In this example, the approach that it is 'better to be safe than sorry' is often employed. One participant described a case in which a minor was registered on the extremism/terrorism list due to an increasing interest in online extremist platforms, his deviant behaviour towards his mother, and his mother's concerns about his behaviour. In another case, an educator had to deal with a worried parent who believed his son had left for Syria to join a terrorist group — the educator decided to immediately contact the security agencies (contrary to the standard protocol), who were able to stop the young man. The participants' discussion of these cases underlined the importance of

Ethical dilemmas in P/CVE

Ethical dilemmas have been identified on four different levels: structural, political, professional and personal.

In P/CVE, ethical issues on a **structural level** arise when there are questions about the general morality of P/CVE or its fundamental inconsistencies.

An example of ethical issues on a **political level** is when the tension between secrecy, security, transparency and accountability significantly impacts discussions.

On a **professional level**, practical professional values can cause tension with organisational interests.

Lastly, on a **personal level**, individual integrity can come under pressure due to conflicting moral values.

understanding as well as of a continual ethical discussion amongst colleagues within a multi-agency framework, both before and after interventions are carried out — or even before they are established. In essence, the practitioners were highlighting the importance of adopting an ongoing ethical dialogue in a multi-agency evaluation process.

To share or not to share

Finally, participants also discussed how difficult it is to ensure transparency and accountability while simultaneously securing a safe work environment for themselves. An example is a practitioner's decision to share personal information about themselves with a client, versus the need to establish mutual trust between client and practitioner, or making information publicly available, and risking revealing P/CVE approaches and interventions to clients.

Recommendations

- 1. Energise your inner philosopher.** Guidelines tend to be a top-down code of conduct. Ethical dilemmas, on the other hand, vary by person and situation. Practitioners working in P/CVE encounter situations that guidelines or manuals cannot cover (the What vs the How question). Therefore, there is a need for constant dialogue and (self)reflection. When a colleague shares an ethical dilemma and its challenges and questions, other colleagues can reflect and help present a relevant-to-case approach, questioning whether they would make the same decisions and offering advice on alternative ways to approach a situation or client.
- 2. Ethical guidelines can work but should be reinforced by phronesis.** Ethical guidelines can be useful but are necessarily general and abstract. As such, guidelines should be supported by practical wisdom (e.g. from the personal and professional experiences of practitioners) so that they are applicable to a particular work context and setting. When approaching ethical dilemmas and conversations, it might be helpful to have a set of questions taking emotional boundaries, safety, and organisational 'red lines' into consideration (see box for potential questions from and for practitioners).
- 3. Institutionalise an 'ethics safe space' at work that is part of a learning organisation.** P/CVE practitioners are commonly confronted with moral choices and thus ethical dilemmas. The meeting's discussion revealed that participants encounter ethical dilemmas on and between professional and personal level(s). In order to deal with these situations, practitioners should therefore be provided with the space to discuss and learn from each other. Simultaneously, should a workplace or organisation working in the field of P/CVE become aware of these needs, they should allocate resources and continually evaluate the ethical needs and questions. Evaluation may lead to the set-up of counselling sessions or group conversations and/or the creation of roles responsible for ethics, e.g. members of an ethics committee.
- 4. Shift from multi-agency to inter-agency collaboration on ethics.** Trust among P/CVE agencies is key, not only regarding information-sharing, but also for understanding each other's ethical needs and moral reasoning for certain decisions or information requirements. Instead of multi-agency collaboration, P/CVE partners should be more intertwined with each other, especially concerning ethics decision-making. Social

Potential questions for practitioners seeking to balance ethical dilemmas

How do my colleagues react to the situation I am in?

How can I avoid discrimination in my work?

Am I safe (physically, mentally) in this work process?

Am I the right person to work with this client?

What are the risks involved in my decisions?

Is there a better way I can approach the situation?

Am I culturally sensitive enough?

workers with potential extremist clients are greatly concerned about the well-being of their clients and will be reluctant to share information that might harm them. In such a situation, a practical recommendation might be to appoint an external ethics officer to monitor and evaluate the decisions and interventions made by all involved agencies.

5. **Look for inspiration.** Discussing ethics is not an easy task, let alone institutionalising an ethical approach. Luckily, there are several examples of institutionalised approaches. One is Moonshot's Ethics Framework and Committee. The (mental) health sector is also inspiring, with well-established ethical frameworks and committees. The Moral Case Deliberation (MCD) tool¹ is well worth exploring. One participant noted that security agencies receive ethics training from health facilities such as hospitals. Lastly, P/CVE practitioners can learn lessons from whistleblower platforms like the European Network on Integrity and Whistleblowing (NEIWA). These platforms (as well as the whistleblowers) are inherently driven by challenging ethical dilemmas and questions.
6. **Understand the ethics behind violent extremism.** On a more fundamental level, P/CVE undergoes significant scrutiny. There are many ongoing discussions about the morality of P/CVE interventions, especially as regards primary prevention. To prevent extremism, we have to understand the root causes and address them accordingly. Therefore, P/CVE practitioners must understand why people 'become' extremists or terrorists and what their core values and ethical considerations are. One participant put forward Dr Bart Schuurman's book *Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist*.

Follow-up

Given that P/CVE calls for a collective and multi-agency approach, a relevant follow-up meeting could address the possibilities and challenges of having an ethics debate within a multi-agency P/CVE collaborative approach.

This and other outcomes of this meeting will feed into a **webinar on ethical guidelines in P/CVE due to be held on 14 September (14:00–15.30 CET)** to share and discuss the issue with a wider audience.

Further reading

- Michael Kowalski (ed.) (2017), *Ethics of Counterterrorism*
- [European Network on Integrity and Whistleblowing \(NEIWA\)](#)
- [Moonshot's Ethics Framework](#)
- Bart Schuurman (2018), *Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist*

¹ Moral Case Deliberation (MCD) is a structured process whereby a group of individuals, often from diverse professional backgrounds, engage in discussions to analyse and navigate ethical challenges in their work. During MCD, participants collectively examine a specific case or dilemma, discussing their differing perspectives, values and potential courses of action. The aim is to enhance ethical understanding, promote open communication and arrive at a well-considered resolution. MCD encourages participants to critically reflect on their own beliefs, learn from others, and develop more informed and ethical decision-making skills. Ultimately, it fosters a collaborative approach to addressing complex moral issues in various fields, such as healthcare, social work and business.