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## Trusting the Mistrusted: Norwegian Social Workers' Strategies in Preventing Radicalization and Violent Extremism

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### *Abstract*

Social workers are a part of the wider counter-terrorism efforts in many European countries, such as the United Kingdom, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Belgium. While there are several theoretical and discursive studies on social workers' involvement in preventing violent extremism, few studies have explored and analyzed how these prevention workers understand radicalization and the strategies and approaches they employ. This paper addresses this research gap with findings from a qualitative study that utilized data from 17 individual in-depth interviews and two focus-group interviews of experienced social workers doing indicated prevention work against violent extremism in Norway. Goffman's frame analysis and Weber and Carter's theory on the construction of trust are applied to the findings. A thematic analysis found that, first, the participants frame radicalization cases in the same way they do other cases—as a social problem. Second, a two-way process of trust was revealed, as a critical component in their work is creating openings for dialogue about values and ideology. Contrary to other studies, this paper finds that social workers manage this work as close to “business as usual.” Also, it reveals that well-established strategies in social work, such as client-directed practice, Socratic questioning, and motivational interviewing, potentially play an important role in face-to-face prevention work against radicalization and violent extremism.

### *Article History*

Received May 19, 2019

Accepted June 7, 2019

Published June 28, 2019

**Keywords:** Violent Extremism, Radicalization, Prevention, Social Work, Trust

### Introduction

Like many European countries, Norway has had its share of nationals travelling to the Middle East to fight for The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS]. By the end of 2015, at least 87 individuals had travelled, 17 had lost their lives, 40 were still in the area, and 30 had returned to Norway (Sandrup, Weiss, Skiple, & Hofoss, 2018). In addition, due to the existence of

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different extremist groups involving both Islamic extremists (Norwegian Police Security Service [PST], 2016) and the far right (PST, 2019), the issue of radicalization has risen to national attention. This has triggered financial subsidies for projects at the municipal level (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2017). When the Norwegian government launched its action plan and guidelines against radicalization and violent extremism in 2014 and 2015 (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security), social workers became part of the national strategy. Their role consisted of (1) preventing (further) radicalization among youth and adults and (2) providing follow-up services to known extremists, such as foreign fighters who had returned from Syria and Iraq.

Radicalization as a term and phenomenon has been debated (Sedgwick, 2010) and triggers the question “radical in relation to what?” (Neumann, 2013, p. 876). There is no agreed-upon definition of radicalization within the research community, but it is generally viewed as a process over time involving many factors (Borum, 2011; Compelo, Oppetit, Neau, Cohen, & Bronsard, 2018) through which individuals become more inclined toward carrying out violence, such as acts of terrorism (Christmann, 2012; Neumann, 2013). At the other end of the radicalization spectrum is deradicalization, which refers to changes in beliefs and attitudes—essentially, a cognitive transformation away from radicalization. Disengagement, however, refers exclusively to behavioral change and could include abandoning violent groups or ceasing the use of violence (Bjørgero & Gjelsvik, 2015; Bjørgero & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009; Radicalisation Awareness Network [RAN], 2017).

The heterogeneous nature of radicalization triggers a broad spectrum of measures, in which social workers are one piece of the puzzle. Social work as a practice field includes a variety of problems and responsibilities and, thus, plays a logical part in this prevention work as well. Traditionally, social work has largely focused on individuals and groups and, to some extent, on the societal level; the very core of social work lies in relationships with clients (Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002). This involves becoming familiar with clients’ troubles and needs in order to help facilitate empowerment, support diversity, and promote social justice (International Federation of Social Workers [ISDF], 2014). **Engaging with clients at**

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risk of (further) radicalization positions social workers within the indicated prevention category, where concern has already been raised to a higher level (Gordon, 1983).

Earlier in the 1990s, social workers were involved in preventing right-wing extremism, but working to prevent violent Islamic extremism represents a novel experience for social workers and municipalities in general (Bjørge & Gjelsvik, 2015). While there are theoretical and discursive studies on social workers' involvement in preventing radicalization (Guru, 2010; McKendrick & Finch, 2017; Stanley & Guru, 2015), research on how social workers understand radicalization and actually carry out this prevention work remains scarce. The discourse and concepts of radicalization and violent extremism have themselves been found to generate confusion and insecurity among front-line workers in the educational (Mattsson, 2018) and youth work (van de Weert & Eijkman, 2018) sectors, with van de Weert and Eijkman arguing that the uncertainty experienced by prevention workers may have led to arbitrary practices, prejudice, and stigmatization.

Furthermore, there is no single identifiable "profile" of individuals who engage in violent extremism (Sandrup et al., 2018). Instead, a range of reasons for joining extremist groups, as well as different socioeconomic backgrounds, have been identified (Borum, 2011; Compelo et al., 2018; LaFree, Jensen, James, & Safer-Lichtenstein, 2018; Rink & Sharma, 2018; Webber et al., 2018). Contributing to the knowledge about challenges and strategies in this field may be vital to establishing both appropriate and humane strategies to prevent radicalization and violent extremism. Thus, the aim of this research is to explore how Norwegian social workers understand radicalization as well as the strategies they use when working with youth and adults at risk of being (further) radicalized. This leads to the following research question:

- *How do social workers view and handle cases of radicalization?*

In order to answer the research question, this study applies Goffman's (1974) frame analysis, a way of exploring how we make sense of what we experience, and Weber and Carter's

(2003) construction of trust. Both theories are used as they complement each other and elaborate on the findings in combination. But first, this article presents a short review of previous research involving social workers in multiagency cooperation to prevent radicalization and violent extremism.

### Literature Review

Internationally, many disengagement and deradicalization interventions are organized by the police, the criminal justice system, or counter-terrorism agencies. Ferguson (2016) has argued that it is worth considering moving these services to other branches of government that are less associated with security, as some European countries have. Several contributions on the engagement of social workers within the multiagency approach have raised concerns about the stigmatization of client groups, losing track of the profession, and becoming overly concerned with risk (Guru, 2010; Guru, 2012; McKendrick & Finch, 2017; Stanley & Guru, 2015; Stanley, Guru, & Coppock, 2017)

Safeguarding vulnerable youth and adults from radicalization has become part of the responsibility of child protection services and social work (Carlsson, 2017; United Kingdom Department for Education, 2015; Dryden, 2017; Lid et al., 2016; Stephansen, 2017). However, there are indications of uncertainty among social workers in this field; they are unsure of what constitutes potential risk factors for radicalization (Dryden, 2017) and experience professional uncertainty about how to identify and handle cases in which concern is raised (Chisholm & Coulter, 2017; Dryden, 2017; Lid et al., 2016). The risk factors for radicalization identified in the scholarly literature, such as experiences of loss, discrimination, and exclusion (Borum, 2011; Compelo et al., 2018; Rink & Sharma, 2018), apply to other problems as well, thereby increasing the risk of false positives (Rink & Sharma, 2018) and increasing the challenging nature of identification and prevention work.

A key observation in one study of universal and selective prevention workers was the need for a trusting relationship between participants in an intervention and the local

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community where the intervention is located. Also, the approaches used were similar to those from other prevention work (Ponsot, Autixier, & Madriaza, 2017). The same study found that the practitioners felt unequipped to carry out this work and sought additional support, training, and dissemination of practices (Ponsot et al., 2017). Similar uncertainty about what to look for in the process of identifying those at risk of (further) radicalization was found in other studies (Carmi & Gianfrancesco, 2017; Hemmingsen, 2015). Moreover, collecting and sharing information were found to be key in working to prevent radicalization, while actual intervention methods were largely unclear to social workers participating in a multiagency study (Stanley, Guru, & Gupta, 2018). A review by Bjørge and Gjelsvik (2015) outlined that, among other professionals, social workers were involved in work aimed at preventing right-wing extremism in the 1990s in Norway. According to their review, exit strategies—especially parent network meetings and methods for providing guidance and support to public services and families—were found to be effective in dealing with right-wing extremism. Several studies have also recommended various approaches, for example, motivational interviewing, Socratic questioning (RAN, 2017), and family interventions and strength-based approaches (Stanley et al., 2018). Lastly, when maneuvering into dialogue about ideology, remaining close to the client's own doubt while applying subtle strategies to reduce resistance was recommended by Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013).

The research on social workers' involvement in preventing radicalization and violent extremism has found that uncertainty exists regarding how to both identify and handle cases of radicalization. While trust was identified as important in an intervention (Ponsot et al., 2017), the same study also found that practitioners seek more support in terms of training and dissemination of methods. In the following, the current research article will present the theoretical framework applied here and, moreover, will explore how this prevention work is understood and actually carried out by expert social workers performing indicated prevention work. Indicated prevention work addresses cases where specific concern is raised as a consequence of the individuals' actions or statements (Gordon, 1983) and is typically

characterized by advanced stages of problems. The experiences and perspectives of these practitioners have to my knowledge not been included in previous research.

### Theoretical Framework

Frame analysis, as presented by Goffman (1974), is a way of exploring how we make sense of what we experience. Framing is a cognitive, often unconscious, process of identifying what is happening in a specific situation and is based on primary social frameworks within a culture (Goffman, 1974). In frame analysis, Goffman (1974) introduced keying as a means to understand one frame in reference to another. Keyings are thus references that help us understand what is going on around us. When introducing keyings, Goffman (1974) referred to Gregory Batson and his observations of otters playfighting in the zoo. The otters' activity, playfighting, is based on the same pattern as fighting, with smaller adjustments. To the otters, and the spectators in the zoo, it is obvious this is play while at the same time based on something much more serious: fighting. The keying is thus a transformation of something meaningful (the primary social framework) into something patterned on this activity.

In addition to frame analysis, the current paper adds Weber and Carter's (2003) social construction of trust to its theoretical framework. Weber and Carter (2003) argue that trust construction and relationship building are simultaneous processes; the construction of trust allows for the construction of the relationship. Time is an essential part of building trust, and Weber and Carter (2003) argued that trust is neither something that can be given, nor appear in initial encounters, but is constructed through human interaction and the passing of time itself. Similarly, certain roles in society are associated with more trust (for example, our parents or a police officer), and our behavior toward these roles is influenced by our trust in them. Power is associated with structural roles, and this is the ability one has to do whatever one wants or to make others do as one pleases.

Factors that influence the initial process of trust include the meeting individuals' predisposition for (dis)trust, their physical appearance, their personality, common points of

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reference, and their behavior. In addition to time, self-disclosure and perspective-taking are pillars of trust (Weber & Carter, 2003). Self-disclosure is an essential part of the next step in initiating interpersonal relationships and trust and enables the individuals to surpass surface knowledge of each other. Some level of reciprocity is recommended so that neither has more knowledge about the other. Equality in a relationship implies an equal risk and vulnerability. In disclosing something personal, temporality is a key issue: “Knowing when to disclose and what to disclose at that time is an ongoing dilemma in relationship construction. Disclosing an intimacy about the self at the wrong point in time can create a problem in the development of that relationship” (Weber & Carter, 2003, p. 31).

Likewise, the response to disclosure is of similar importance, and how this is managed by the receiving individual influences the construction of trust. Both confidentiality and not passing judgment are factors that Weber and Carter (2003) have highlighted as critical. Information that could possibly result in a negative image of the one disclosing it must not be shared with others, and the person passing judgment creates a negative evaluation of the person being judged. Fear of negative evaluation is something that prevents disclosure and has the power to end a relationship and ruin trust. Likewise, when the self is affirmed through positive evaluation, trust is built. Weber and Carter (2003) have drawn a clear distinction between being nonjudgmental and always agreeing with what is disclosed by the other. This relates to the third main component in the construction of trust: perspective-taking.

Weber and Carter’s perspective-taking is based on Mead’s concept: “According to Mead (1934), taking the perspective of the other entails the imaginative placement of oneself in the shoes of the other and viewing the world as the other would view it” (Weber & Carter, 2003, p. 45). The construction of trust is complete when both individuals know the other’s perspective, and this perspective influences their decision making, what Weber and Carter (2003) call enactment. Trust is thus a way of relating to the other because, knowing that trust is established, we act in a certain way toward each other and expect a certain treatment in return (Weber & Carter, 2003).

## Methodology

This is a qualitative in-depth study of experienced social workers' perspectives and experiences with preventing (further) radicalization and violent extremism (Blaikie, 2010). The research focused on several agencies and municipalities, and qualitative data were collected in the eastern, middle, and western parts of Norway, in both large cities and smaller municipalities. The participants were found and recruited using purposeful sampling to obtain information-rich cases (Yin, 2016). This process started by using my own professional network as well as local managers and coordinators to gain access to front-line practitioners involved in this area of work. The snowball method, or chain referral, was used to reach additional informants through their professional networks (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

### *Participants*

There is no standard way of organizing this particular prevention work in Norway. Thus, the participants were selected from child protection services, welfare services, outreach services, and various projects. Though employed in different services, the participants shared commonalities in terms of experience, tasks, and responsibilities in providing services to clients at risk of (further) radicalization. They mainly carry out indicated prevention work when concern has already been raised (Gordon, 1983). Their clients are recruited through various channels, such as from other caseworkers in child protection or social services, from the police, or from schools. The sampled participants gave a broad insight into the methods and strategies used in their face-to-face meetings with clients.

Data triangulation, which seeks several ways to verify findings (Yin, 2016), was performed by conducting 17 in-depth interviews and two focus-group interviews, with five participants in each session. The five participants in the focus groups were recruited from the in-depth interviews, and they all participated in both focus groups. The two focus group interviews comprised the last stage of the process, and topics from the in-depth interviews were discussed and explored in the groups to shed further light on them. The interviews had a

mean length of 101 minutes. There were both female (6) and male (11) informants, with a mean age of 39 years. About half of the informants (8) had master's degrees as their highest educational attainment, while the other half had bachelor's degrees (9). All were experienced social workers with a mean of 12.5 years of social work practice and a mean of 3.5 years of practice preventing radicalization and violent extremism.

#### *Ethical considerations*

The research was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data on February 01, 2018 (project no. 58477). Information about the research project, its methodology, aim, and confidentiality, as well as the consent form was provided either in paper or by email to the potential participants early in the recruitment process. This information was repeated prior to the interviews. Consent forms were collected before the interviews. The forms were stored in a locked cabinet at campus. Audio recordings of interviews were securely stored according to guidelines of the University of Stavanger. To assure the participants' discretion, all data were anonymized.

#### *Analysis*

The data collection, transcription, and analysis were ongoing and overlapped throughout 2018, making it possible to later explore topics that were partially unanswered in the early stages of the data collection. A six-phase thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with an abductive approach has been applied in this paper. Thematic analysis, as set forth by Braun and Clarke (2006), starts with getting to know the transcripts and generating initial codes. Examining and reviewing the codes reveals the initial themes. In this process, I went back and forth among transcripts, codes, and themes to evaluate their coherence or distinction from one another (cf Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). After a review of the themes, two main themes and three subthemes emerged, as illustrated in Figure 1.

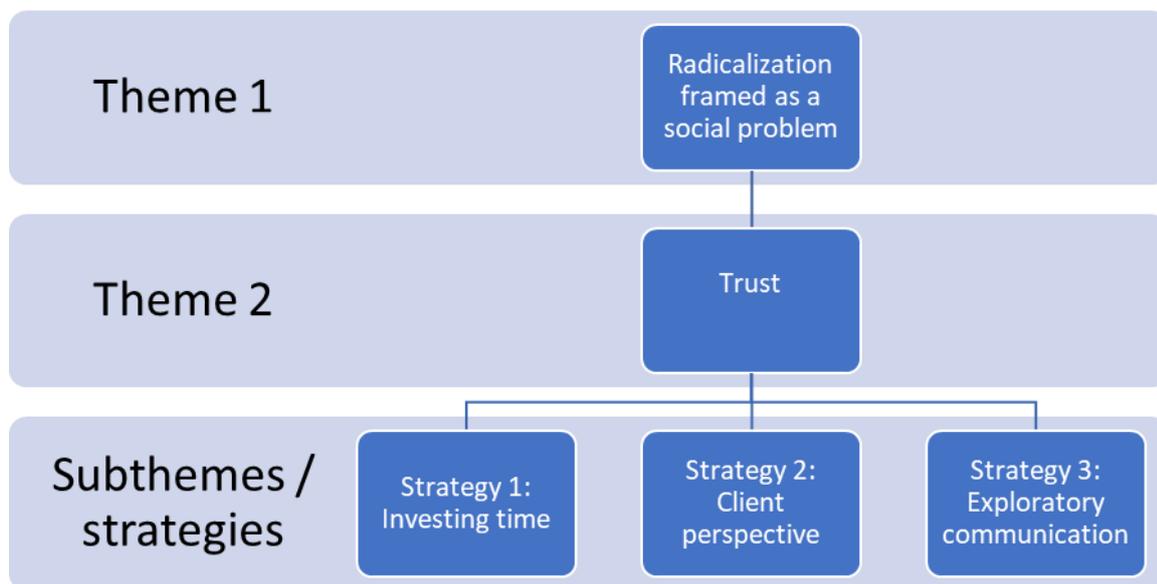


Figure 1. Model of social workers' approaches to handling cases of radicalization.

## Findings

### *Theme 1: Radicalization understood as a social problem*

Throughout the analysis, the overall perception of how social workers understand radicalization stood out—as a social problem. Both explicitly and indirectly, the social workers frame this task in a similar manner as they do other tasks. Radicalization is understood as the result of the interplay between risk factors and protective factors. The framing of radicalization in this way enables the social workers to use traditional approaches within social work and is, thus, a familiar task to them. One participant's statement illustrates an understanding of radicalization and the risk factors involved, which was common to a majority of the informants:

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*But it's just youth in crisis. It is just youths who have challenges in the same way as other youths who have challenges in other areas. So, I think that it goes back to seeing the person [not the symptom]. (Participant 5)*

Yet another participant addressed this in relation to marginalization and exclusion:

*I can say briefly what I've noticed. At least I have been very concerned with preventing exclusion. Basically, I think it's a lot about just that—lack of affiliation, perhaps not having anything, perhaps being unemployed, perhaps not attending school. Somehow finding a way to get people back to society again is our job. And that is much the same as what we otherwise do—to prevent exclusion, to create a sense of belonging. (Participant in focus group 1)*

This framing of radicalization can be understood through Goffman's (1974) keyings. The keying presented in the second statement (i.e., lack of affiliation, being unemployed, dropping out of school) shows how the participants understand radicalization through this primary framework. The risk factors presented in the statement are common risk factors that apply to several problems social workers typically deal with. This framing appears to be transferred to the cases of radicalization. **Balancing risk factors and protective factors with their clients is an everyday task for social workers** (Traube, James, Zhang, & Landsverk, 2012; Wilkins, 2015). Understanding radicalization in this way influences practices and approaches by making the clients' social issues the priority. The second theme, trust, is a result of the first theme. In the following, we explore trust and the methods social workers apply in their prevention work.

### *Theme 2: Trust*

Prior to exploring any sensitive topics related to values and ideologies (e.g., support for extremist organizations, such as ISIS), the participants strive to establish trust between

themselves and their clients. Trust is found to be a goal itself, as well as a component in the strategies that will be presented in the following.

*It's all about relationship building. And without it, you won't get anywhere. They must, first of all, feel confident in me. So, it's all about building a relationship where they understand my agenda—and that it's not to somehow monitor and help the police with security tasks. I have nothing to do with that. My agenda is to help my users get on in life. I am very clear about that, all the way. (Participant 10)*

Gaining trust requires the informants to apply different strategies in face-to-face meetings in order to establish themselves as trustworthy. The above shows how one participant uses clarification of role and agenda to establish himself as an authentic social worker who can be trusted. This particular strategy was identified by the majority of the participants and is applied in combination with a sensitive and curious approach to the clients. Clarification of the social worker's role and agenda was, often repeatedly, highlighted as an essential part of the initial phase of contact. This establishing of initial trust appears to act as a structure on which the subsequent methods and approaches come to rely. Thus, trust is both a goal and a means to carry out later prevention strategies.

*Again, it's all about the relationship. I have been very focused on that. I can't give you any recipe for how to get them to lower their guard, but I focus on establishing a good relationship. It has been alpha and omega, and I have been clear on my role and clear about who and what I have to report, and to whom. But I've also given a lot of myself, like me personally, too. (Participant 11)*

This quote shows that the participant's focus is also on establishing some basic level of trust in the relationship and he utilizes a clarification of his role and agenda to do that. Additionally, and contrary to the previous participant's statement, he also opens up some

personal parts of his life to his clients. While not stated explicitly, this opening up was revealed when he spoke about how to get his clients to trust him by getting them to lower their guard. The act of opening up, aimed at establishing some form of reciprocity, is thus personally seen as a strategy in gaining clients' trust (Weber & Carter, 2003).

*It is essential, that relationship. The first thing I do is that I focus on the relationship with my users. I have users who meet up every day. We do normal things together—we eat together, we drink coffee together—we do everyday things. Things that do not relate to Syria, or some Nazi demonstration. There are only two people sitting and talking, drinking coffee. (Participant in focus group 1)*

The statement above describes a situation and strategy that do not appear to include opening up about one's personal life or be focused on changing the client's behavior or beliefs. On the contrary, it portrays a strategy that aims to connect two individuals through shared experiences in everyday life. Two of the informants did, however, mention that there is a possibility they were being naïve and that their trust could be manipulated by the clients to reduce the concern regarding (further) radicalization. The following examples of strategies (subthemes) will exemplify and elaborate on how the participants move on to prevent radicalization and violent extremism.

#### *Strategy 1: Investing time*

Time is identified, either explicitly or implied, as a major component in the participants' work to prevent radicalization and violent extremism. In the exchange below, the participant's experience is that time spent is of value itself, which may further open up to other areas of the clients' lives:

*Interviewer: What do you think is most important when working to prevent radicalization?*

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*Participant: Spend enough time.*

*Interviewer: To get to know them?*

*Participant: Yes, and then many of the other things just come naturally. You become more familiar with the person. Try to create trust. Work more with relationships, and then the other elements come naturally. You can talk about family, childhood, as much as possible. You have a better base for exploring that then. (Participant 8)*

In addition to spending actual time trying to get to know the individuals with whom they work and build trust through time, the participants also highlighted how they themselves invest their own time in being available. While this is not imposed by their employers, they themselves recognized it and their experience as social workers as ways to show they are willing to invest private hours in getting to know their clients, even after “office hours”:

*Interviewer: It sounds like you have to be pretty close to them, to be there when it happens, regardless of what it may be.*

*Participant: Yes, this takes a lot of time and it requires flexibility and availability. So when you receive a text message in the evening, at half past 10, then you have to answer it. And it may very well be messages going back and forth that lasts an hour. There may be some things they wonder about, and then, you show that “I am here. I am here for you.” I think that is the common denominator for all this work. Availability. (Participant 5)*

The participants in this study invest time in the relationship with their clients in order to make it secure, thus making it possible to move closer to the more sensitive matters of ideology:

*It's about creating a situation where the other doesn't get defensive and you can show that you do not agree with what is being uttered. But that requires a relationship, a relationship where the two are secure about each other. Otherwise you leave it be.*

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*Then, you can try to move on to some other topic, and then, you wait for a time where you can get back to the case, where you say what you mean. You do this when you are confident that this will not result in a confrontation, that it will be a dialogue, a conversation about a thing. It is about equality, being equal in that debate. And then, they have the right to tell you their thoughts, express themselves, what they mean. Only then will you have a constructive conversation. It is very important, and very difficult. I think at first, it's the hardest. Because you don't know each other well. And that takes time. Time is everything, time is gold, to get into these situations. (Participant in focus group 2)*

Above, the participant shows that the combination of investing time and applying a sensitive touch to his approaches to ideology makes a significant contribution to moving the working relationship toward a dialogue between two individuals and to establishing some level of equality.

#### *Strategy 2: Client perspective*

An overall strategy identified by the participants in the early stages of contact with a new client is to strive to understand and identify the client's needs by taking into account the client's perspective. This strategy makes the social worker disregard, at least temporarily, the various expressions of extreme attitudes and ideologies as well as draw attention away from security and risk concern. The statements below give insight into this.

*About the goal of that kind of working relationship, first, one has to identify what the youth needs in the eyes of the youth, and it is not always beneficial to focus too much on the concern for radicalization. It's an open topic when we get in touch—"This is a concern they have for you," and so on—but then, we put it aside a bit and ask, "Who are you, really?" Then, we start from there with common ways of approaching young*

*people: get to know the youth as they see themselves and understand what their needs are. (Participant 3)*

One participant emphasized that viewing the client's perspective, through their needs, is an important approach in this prevention work, as is investing a lot of time in establishing a relationship, which incorporates both perspective-taking and time (cf Weber & Carter, 2003):

*Interviewer: If you were to say the thing that you have experienced that works, what would that be?*

*Participant: I think that, as much as possible, try to meet their needs.*

*Interviewer: Do you start with that?*

*Participant: Yes, and spend a lot of time establishing a good relationship. Then, you can try to work further to explore their background, family relationships, social networks, and so on. (Participant 8)*

While the participants in this study consider spending time getting to know the clients' needs, and being available for them, to be important, they also have to have a sensitive touch regarding how and when to address the topics of either supporting or joining organizations like ISIS. One participant explained that she is cautious about pointing out the danger of travelling to Syria and joining ISIS. While not overlooking the concern for travelling to Syria, the participant focuses on the client's needs, here and now, through the client's perspective. This approach transforms the working situation from being risk- and security-oriented to being client-focused and regards their needs in accordance with their own experience of what they actually need.

*Yes. It took quite some time. But I spent that time on the relationship. Without the relationship, you will get nowhere. If at first you say to a youth that "I'm worried about you. Are you going to travel [to Syria]? It is dangerous there"—things like*

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*that—then they are going to distance themselves from you. They will be scared. They aren't identified by the system so often, but they need help. [...] I helped her with many things, physical health, going to a doctor, helping her find housing, helping her with social services, getting her finances—she had nothing. And I have shown all the time that I am interested in hearing what she has to say and I was very accessible to her. Sometimes I was with her for a whole day, maybe 10 hours even, just me and her. So, I felt like I was getting her confidence over time. (Participant 17)*

Identifying and focusing on clients' needs and taking their perspectives into account is a well-known strategy in social work, and the statements above paint a picture of the participants' work as being close to “business as usual.”

### *Strategy 3: Exploratory communication*

The third strategy revealed was the participants' use of well-established strategies for communication, such as Socratic questioning and motivational interviewing, the aim of which is to reduce resistance from clients and to create open dialogue. The following two statements reflect how the participants use these strategies to further explore and work with their clients' perspectives and thoughts.

*Instead of showing a dismissive attitude toward their opinions, I try to be curious and make him explain his ideology more, do a deep dive. Because there is something about the reasoning that they have to do then. It's like a Socratic approach, where you ask questions and then you get a new answer; then, you often branch it further and further into that person. It promotes some reasoning rather than the rejection they often receive when speaking their opinion elsewhere. (Participant 7)*

In addition to getting to know the clients better and making their perspectives accessible for the social workers, this strategy is also used to promote the clients' reasoning as well as to signal that they can talk about these topics with the social workers.

*Interviewer: Is that a conscious strategy, to ask and be curious instead of confronting?*

*Participant: Yes, I think it's very important that we are curious. I think confronting accomplishes very little, really. Being more curious, I think it's easier for them to tell me then than if I'm more confrontational, like "Why do you mean that?" It's not always that easy, though. But I think it can be important.*

*Interviewer: Your wondering gives you some answers, that you know more about them maybe, understand them in another way. But what do you think your wondering leads to for them?*

*Participants: I hope it signals that I care and sincerely want to know more about them, try to understand them in a different way. At the same time, it somehow legitimizes that they should be allowed to feel what they feel, and it can possibly open up for them to talk about it. (Participant in focus group 2)*

The approaches presented above, characterized by a curious and exploratory mode, were revealed by informants from a range of sites and services. They constitute a typical strategy when addressing a client's ideologies and values. Both motivational interviewing and Socratic questioning were explicitly stated as favored communication strategies by several participants. Their communication strategies are anchored to the goal of gaining insight into their clients' most inner workings—their feelings, thoughts, values, and ideologies. This strengthens the participants' position as well within the realm of client-directed practices. The participants' own professional thoughts and working goals are put aside in favor of the clients'.

## Discussion

The two main findings in this study are that social workers appear to frame the task of preventing radicalization and violent extremism in a similar manner to other tasks and that trust is a key component in their approach to the clients. Yet, in the multidisciplinary field of preventing radicalization and violent extremism, these approaches appear to be little characterized by risk and security concerns. Trust is specifically presented as a goal itself. However, as the strategies they employ in this prevention work were explored, it became clear that trust is also given indirectly by the participants to their clients. Thus, trust is a two-way approach that social workers utilize as a strategy in preventing radicalization and violent extremism. Being involved in a multiagency approach to prevent radicalization and violent extremism, the participants' strategies emerged somewhat surprisingly and were contrary to my assumptions of what I might find. **Security work and risk assessments were strongly overshadowed by a client-oriented approach aimed at identifying and working toward the clients' own goals.** Also, as the findings show, there was little evidence of professional uncertainty as to how to handle the cases. The discussions that follow will apply Goffman's (1974) frame analysis, Weber and Carter's (2003) construction of trust, and previous research findings to the findings above.

### *Radicalization understood as a social problem*

The first theme identified in the analysis was that the study participants framed this specific prevention work in the same way they framed their work in general. Framing (Goffman, 1974) is a way of creating and re-creating an understanding of reality, often simplifying and condensing the world "out there" (Snow & Benford, 1992, p. 137). The participants' framing appears to be client-oriented, with an aim to establish trust and confidentiality before moving on to supportive measures and sensitive matters of ideology. Thus, social workers carry out their work in a traditional manner. This was highlighted as an intentional strategy by some informants, with others providing various examples indicating it.

As part of a multiagency cooperation with police and police security services, this framing and its consequence establish the participants' authenticity as social workers vis-à-vis their clients. Both the framing and how the social workers perform this prevention work add to their trustworthiness.

While it is impossible to explicitly state on behalf of others what the clients expect from social workers, social workers themselves claim to stand for principles of respect for individuals and diversity, to not do harm, and to promote social development, change, and empowerment of people (ISDF, 2014). The transition of a primary social worker frame onto the work of preventing radicalization and violent extremism appears to establish the desired image of their role in this multidisciplinary approach as trustworthy social workers.

### *Trust*

A trusting relationship between client and social worker is important (Smith, 2001) and is something that needs to be established over time before clients feel sufficiently secure to reveal very sensitive problems (Weinstein, Levine, Kogan, Harkavay-Friedman, & Miller, 2000). The need to secure confidentiality in social work practice has been argued by many scholars as a cornerstone of trust, essential to building an effective working relationship (Aamodt, 2014; McLaren, 2007). Moreover, it has been argued that, in order for social workers to be perceived as trustworthy, they must perform their work in a way that reflects social norms and professional values (Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). In addition, clients generally seek signs that both parties are committed to the relationship and that positive relational signals provide a sense of security (McLaren, 2007). This explains how the participants perceive the importance of investing time in the process of establishing contact and clarifying their role and agenda. As shown above, this is generally found in social work; however, in the context of preventing radicalization and violent extremism, this may be of even more importance because the ideologies to which some of these individuals subscribe involve acts of violence, which are illegal. Weber and Carter's (2003) concept of trust is constructed of several elements that build trust in an interpersonal relationship. In the

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following, the discussion will apply these elements of trust construction to the strategies and approaches identified in Norwegian social workers' efforts to prevent radicalization and violent extremism.

### *Time*

This study finds, both explicitly and indirectly, that time itself is a very important component in the process of establishing a trusting relationship between social workers and clients. According to Weber and Carter (2003), the passing of time itself contributes significantly to creating trust in an interpersonal relationship. Interestingly, the participants in this study revealed no sense of alertness or sensation when it comes to working with the topic of radicalization and violent extremism, and there was also little evidence of professional uncertainty. This finding is in contrast to earlier studies of social workers involved in the same work (Chisholm & Coulter, 2017; Dryden, 2017; Lid et al., 2016; Mattsson, 2018; van de Weert & Eijkman, 2018).

My findings indicate that the social workers' framing of their task influences how they carry out their work. This might, to some extent, also explain why they manage to invest time and not be overwhelmed by their clients' values and ideologies in the early stages of contact. In one of the statements presented in the findings, the participant explains that spending a lot of time with his clients is the one strategy that he would highlight as most important in this work. The participant's experience is that, through spending time together, they get to know each other and insights into other parts of the clients' lives come naturally. Similarly, one of the other participants explained that he just spends time with his clients, at times doing normal things like having coffee, eating, and just talking. This adds another element to the building of trust: reciprocity. While their relationship is not equal due to social norms and their different roles to each other, this practice appears to move the social worker out of the office and its power and into a more neutral way of engaging in the relationship with the client. According to Weber and Carter (2003), this strategy is applied to even out the imbalance of their positions and strive to create reciprocity. While social workers are not typically authoritative,

their part in the multidisciplinary approach connects them to authorities, such as the police and the police security service (e.g. PST). This strategy can be understood as establishing the participants as trustworthy and “there to help,” not control.

### *Self-disclosure*

An extensive reciprocated self-disclosure of private or intimate information is outside of the social worker–client relation. Therefore, establishing an interpersonal relationship that follows the exact same construction thus seems somewhat wrong, as boundaries have been identified to protect both client and social worker (O’Leary, Tsui, & Ruch, 2013). Reciprocity, therefore, must be achieved by other means, such as clarifying agenda and role. The social context and structure within which the relationship evolves are associated with factors that can both bolster and impair the possibility of trust. Social workers are in need of clients’ trust (Smith, 2001), and the clients are in need of the social workers’ confidentiality and time. Although a different kind of reciprocation, it is still a form of it. In the securitized field of preventing radicalization and violent extremism, disclosing and revealing agendas, priorities, and cooperation with other services is one way of presenting self-disclosure to their clients. In one particular statement, a participant in this study revealed that he was clear about his agenda all the way, indicating that this was brought up at an early point in the relationship with the client. Likewise, another participant stated that he makes it clear that he sometimes has to report information to other authorities. He also revealed that he chooses to give a lot of himself personally. As mentioned in the section about investing time itself in the relationship, some of the participants also seem to make an effort to reduce the imbalance of their positions by seeking ways of creating reciprocity in situations where it is otherwise rarely found. This is achieved by doing regular things together, such as drinking coffee, eating, and talking about normal things, as well as by helping clients get to the doctor, assisting in their financial situation, being available, and showing them respect.

While self-disclosure might be a valuable part of an intervention, researchers have struggled with how much to reveal and when (Gibson, 2012). The temporality of disclosing

sensitive information was given attention by the participants in the current study, and it appears that, in early stages of contact, duties and responsibilities are disclosed to the clients, as is how they themselves understand their role and task. This kind of self-disclosure is referred to as transparency disclosure by Knight (2012) and is viewed as less disruptive to a client session than more personal disclosures, which she refers to as self-involving disclosures. Other researchers have found that professionals' self-disclosure provides a sense of symmetry and gives clients a chance to relax for a while (Audet & Overall, 2010). The openness about their part in the multidisciplinary approach was something that the participants in the current study themselves presented to their clients. Concern for role ambiguity and discrepancies have been identified in earlier studies related to social workers involved in preventing radicalization and violent extremism (McKendrick & Finch, 2017; Stanley, Guru, & Coppock, 2017). This may explain why disclosure of multiagency cooperation was of concern for this study's participants.

The other side of self-disclosure in this case is how the participants respond to clients' disclosure of personal thoughts and ideology. One of the statements in the findings section presents a social worker who is clearly focused on not passing judgment on his client's opinions but instead responds with curiosity. Children and youth have previously emphasized the importance of competent and trustworthy social workers when choosing to disclose abuse (Thulin, Kjellgren, & Nilsson, 2019). A positive and nonjudgmental response to private disclosure has the potential to evolve the trusting relationship further as well as to explore the perspective of the other (Weber & Carter, 2003).

### *Perspective-taking*

Self-disclosure is a personalized sharing of information that creates the possibility of taking the other's perspective into account. Weber and Carter (2003) have emphasized that perspective-taking, within the confines of interpersonal relationships, is one of the most important steps in creating trust. Perspective-taking, in combination with confidentiality and nonjudgmental responses, can lead to decision making that is highly affected by the other's

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situation. This study's participants have perspective-taking as a common thread in their identified practices, although not being explicitly aimed to create trust. The participants shared that they seek to get to know their clients, while applying various strategies to explore and understand their thoughts. Perspective-taking has also been found to motivate forgiveness for a possible violent outgroup target in a two-part study of Israelis and Palestinians (Noor & Halabi, 2018). The authors of that study found that, irrespective of a present threat, perspective-taking can lead to increased motivation to forgive as well as increased interpersonal liking towards the target of the perspective-taking. Noor and Halabi (2018) point out that perspective-taking generally leads to more favorable attitudes and gestures to the individuals or groups in mind. This might influence and strengthen the social workers' willingness and ability to engage in empathic and exploratory dialogue about their clients' attitudes, values and ideology. While Weber and Carter (2003) emphasized perspective-taking as a key element in the construction of trust, it was also found that having the client as an active part in the working relationship has other benefits as well.

Research on predictors of addiction intervention outcomes has found that, regardless of the type and intensity of the intervention, client engagement is the best predictor of positive outcomes (Miller, Mee-Lee, Plum, & Hubble, 2005) and that the client should play a leading role in the work (Duncan & Miller, 2000). Moreover, the therapeutic relationship between the social worker and client has been found to contribute 5–10 times more to the outcome than the method or approach used in the intervention (Miller et al., 2005). While these findings may not be directly transferrable to work in which concern for (further) radicalization has been raised, there are commonalities. For example, meetings are face to face, and the social worker seeks the client's own understanding of his or her situation and problems before initiating the various measures and services available. By directing the focus to the client's own understanding, and thus sticking to the more traditional supportive role of social work, the social worker simultaneously draws focus away from the concern for engagement in or support for violent organizations. This focus may add to the social worker's trustworthiness.

Taking into account the clients' perspectives regarding their needs, and working to

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support them, has also been found to have a secondary effect, along with increasing the chance of success in interventions. The counsellors' facilitative attitudes correlate with their clients' trust in them. This trust enables clients to confront and work through difficult issues in therapy (Peschken & Johnson, 1997). With these previous research findings in mind, the findings of this study indicate that trust itself may create openings for dialogue about ideology. Motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2012) and Socratic questioning (Braun, Strunk, Sasso, & Cooper, 2015) are strategies, or components of strategies, aimed at exploring and influencing thoughts and behavior. These and other behavioral techniques require client participation, and establishing a therapeutic relationship is especially important in this context (Turner & Rowe, 2013). This communicates an impression of the social worker as an empathic individual (Lord, Sheng, Imel, Baer, & Atkins, 2015) and sparks client activity and cooperation (Vansteenkiste & Sheldon, 2010) in the work. These approaches appear as a consequence of the participants' framing of radicalization as a social problem and may contribute to establishing the social worker as trustworthy in a field with mixed professions, where agendas might be unclear. The identified strategies have similarities with the recommendations from RAN (2017), Stanley et al. (2018), and Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013) in relation to focusing on strength-based approaches and staying close to client narratives to reduce their resistance in dialogue.

While the concern for client manipulation was only mentioned by two of the informants, the phenomenon is possibly more relevant in this specific context than in other helping relations. Gaining the therapist's trust, or taking advantage of the therapist's desire to be perceived as caring and liked, is something that manipulative individuals might try to exploit (Hepworth, 1993). While the police and security services manage their concern regardless of how cooperating agencies manage their own, the social workers' voices and perspectives on their clients might, and should, influence how the clients are looked upon in this multidisciplinary cooperation. Hence, efforts to manipulate social workers' level of concern by playing with their trust is worth being aware of.

*How do these findings compare to those of other studies?*

Previous research has uncovered that social workers are insecure about how to handle cases of radicalization and that they have called for dissemination of practices and methods in this field. The present study explored how experienced social workers in Norway perceive radicalization and the strategies and methods used in their indicated prevention work.

The present findings are somewhat consistent with some of the findings from Ponsot et al. (2017) in regard to the need for a trusting relationship between the participants in an intervention. The uncertainty about how to handle cases found by Lid et al. (2016), Ponsot et al. (2017), and Stanley et al. (2018) was only marginally identified in this study. This may be explained by the focus of the study on addressing what they were actually doing. The participants themselves are experienced, which could lead to several answers about professional certainty. They could do what they always do, “play it safe,” so to speak, when confronted with a new task. Or they might have a broader capacity to evaluate the task at hand and how to deal with it. While a few of the informants did experience some uncertainty, others may have overcome uncertainty through how they frame the task of preventing violent extremism—as a social problem. However, this study contributes significantly to the research gap by adding the experience of those doing indicated prevention work, where a higher level of concern is found. Also, this study’s unique finding is that trust is not only something that social workers seek to receive from their clients but is also something that they give in return, indirectly through their chosen approaches. This is found to create potential for a reciprocated working relationship, opening up the path to further explore, and possibly influence, clients’ ideologies.

*Limitations*

While this paper fills a gap in the research on how prevention work against violent extremism is carried out, there are some limitations regarding the findings. As presented earlier, there is no single profile of individuals who become radicalized and engage in violent extremism. Thus, nuanced, individually managed, and context-sensitive measures should be

applied by local prevention workers, police, and security services. This study engaged with first-line social workers in Norway and explored their strategies and approaches without trying to evaluate effectiveness. There is a risk of selection bias when recruiting participants, especially through own connections and network. In this study, I strived to recruit social workers from a variety of services located in different regions of Norway, that would complement each other and provide both rich and nuanced descriptions of their experiences. The study only grasped how social workers appeared to frame the risk of radicalization and their profession-based responses to it. Therefore, it is important to keep the Norwegian context and profession of the participants in mind when interpreting the findings. Also, the low number of participants (n=17) must be taken into account.

## Conclusion

The current research sought to explore and analyze how Norwegian social workers both view and handle cases of radicalization and engaged with experienced social workers with responsibilities and tasks in preventing radicalization in several municipalities in Norway. This paper has revealed that social workers both frame and target radicalization cases in a similar manner as they frame other cases—as a social problem.

The participants highlighted that, in the context of preventing radicalization and violent extremism, clarifications regarding roles and agenda are crucial to establishing trust in the early stages of contact, as is investing time and taking the clients' perspectives into account. Intentionally or otherwise, a traditional social work approach to cases of radicalization seems to generate both trust and cooperation with clients. This creates openings for social workers to address more sensitive matters regarding values, ideology, and support for various violent organizations. This article contributes to a fairly scarce body of evidence regarding practices aimed at preventing radicalization and violent extremism. It both emphasizes earlier findings of the need for trust and expands the state of knowledge in the current research field by adding the traditional social worker approach. The unique finding in

this paper is that trust is not only something the social workers strive to receive from their clients but is also something that they give in return through their methods. This paper also finds that well-established strategies in social work, such as client-directed practice, Socratic questioning, and motivational interviewing, are used in preventing radicalization and violent extremism and that first-line practitioners may use methods to which they are accustomed in a potential new field of practice.

This study's findings have implications for practice in both social work in general and the broader counter-terrorism field. The development of trust, both in and from the clients, may trigger a vital client engagement in a field where they might feel mistrusted and under surveillance by local and state authorities. Future studies should further explore strategies used in prevention work through both interviews and observations, as well as how interventions are experienced by those on the receiving end. Former members of violent organizations should be included in studies to explore strategies and attempts to manipulate professionals involved in this multidisciplinary approach. Additionally, studies involving various government services and clients should be developed to assess the effect of these interventions and their ethical implications.

### **Acknowledgements**

While I have carried out this research independently, it would not have been possible without the help and support of others. I would especially like to thank my supervisors, Associate Professor Svein Erik Tuastad and Associate Professor Hulda Mjøll Gunnarsdottir, and other colleagues in the Department of Social Studies at the University of Stavanger for their contributions in this process.

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ISSN: 2363-9849

Editor in Chief: Daniel Koehler