JOURNAL FOR DERADICALIZATION

Summer 2023
No. 35
ISSN: 2363-9849

Policy Paper: The Ethics of Using Formers to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism

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Abstract
After 9/11, the academic study of terrorism flourished as more government resources were focused on counterterrorism efforts. As the focus slowly shifted towards P/CVE or Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, more and more articles lauded the potential benefits of including Formers. The idea behind that was that experience equals expertise. Formers have been valuable data sources as research participants. However, the current trend has seen Formers leave that role and take on far more complicated and sophisticated roles, such as deradicalization experts, claiming to help people leave extremism. This policy paper focuses on the evidence, specifically the lack of evidence, to support the prevailing assumptions regarding the effectiveness of Formers and dissects the ethical issues arising from their involvement in P/CVE. The paper ends with policy recommendations to shift P/CVE activities and research toward a more empirically-grounded model. Since P/CVE initiatives involve a variety of actors, from academic researchers to the media to practitioners, this paper is not aimed at one field or profession. Rather, it is intended for everyone involved in P/CVE-related activities, including research.

Article History
Received Apr 14, 2023
Accepted Jun 27, 2023
Published Jun 30, 2023

Keywords: Former Extremists, P/CVE, Ethics, Research, Practitioners

Introduction: A note on definitions

For this essay, the term Formers refers to individuals who were once members of an extremist or terrorist group or movement **that are now involved in P/CVE activities** - this includes individuals who have made a career out of their former membership or identity. The term Formers is capitalized to distinguish professional formers – individuals who are capitalizing on their experiences alone by becoming involved in P/CVE activities – from individuals who have simply walked away from terrorism/extremism.

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Background Information

In 2011, the Obama administration released its plan to fight terrorism. *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States (The White House, 2011)* highlighted the need to take a community approach since "there is no single issue or grievance that pushes individuals toward supporting or committing violence, and the path to violent extremism can vary considerably" (p.3). The administration seemed to recognize the need for a 'softer' approach to counterterrorism and so began the age of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, or P/CVE, in the U.S.

The literature on P/CVE suggests that Formers are one of the most valuable weapons in the fight against terrorism (Hedaya, 2017; Mattson & Johansson, 2020) and a terrorism expert went so far as asserting during a House hearing that "the most credible voices on the planet are former extremists" (U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015). However, evidence supporting Formers' effectiveness in counternarratives and deradicalization has yet to materialize.

In recent years, there has been a flourishing industry of professional Formers claiming to be able to help individuals deradicalize and disengage from violence or claim expertise in all things terrorism. Formers are now involved in activities across all three levels of prevention.[2] In primary prevention, Formers are often part of efforts to educate the public about extremism and offer narratives to counter extremist ideologies (Gansewig & Walsh, 2021; Parker & Lindekilde, 2020). On the secondary and tertiary levels, Formers meet with at-risk individuals or individuals who have already radicalized to help them deradicalize and disengage (McCloskey, 2022). Formers also lecture at schools, speak to law enforcement agencies, and create or work for non-profit organizations offering deradicalization and

[2]P/CVE programs have traditionally followed the public health model of prevention. The model distinguishes between three prevention levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention (Weine & Eisenman, 2016). Primary prevention refers to efforts to prevent the disease or illness, or in the case of P/CVE radicalization, from happening. Secondary prevention focuses on detecting and addressing issues that might eventually pose a threat before they become a problem. In P/CVE, for example, secondary prevention might include practitioners reaching out to individuals at risk of radicalizing due to ties to an extremist social network (Weine & Eisenman, 2016). Finally, tertiary prevention happens after the fact and focuses on reducing the impact. For example, in P/CVE, activities targeted at individuals who have radicalized but have yet to mobilize would fall under the purview of tertiary prevention.

intervention services (including the non-profits Life After Hate, Parents for Peace, Parallel Networks, and Beyond Barriers). Formers are also invited to participate in conferences and academic panels on P/CVE.[3]

Historical Use of Former Terrorists in Peacebuilding

Historically, perpetrators of political violence have been utilized for peacebuilding purposes in several countries. Consequently, research into those programs inspired current iterations of P/CVE initiatives, including using Formers (Alonso & Bada, 2016). Indeed, practitioners and policymakers promoting the use of Formers as an effective tool in the fight against radicalization often cite the experiences of countries such as Yugoslavia and South Africa. However, as Alonso & Bada (2016) highlight, it is important to consider a number of issues, including the fact that there are "important differences that can be appreciated between those contexts and [European] liberal democracies" (p. 983). Additionally, as explained further below, there have been criticisms of the use of former combatants in Ireland and Spain.

Nowhere is it more evident that context matters than when comparing Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) initiatives established in Northern Ireland following the Good Friday Agreement with P/CVE. Former combatants have been used in Northern Ireland to reduce support for and de-escalate violence between paramilitary groups. Former combatants were found to effectively prevent violence from re-occurring but at the risk of undermining democracy and ignoring victims' wishes and rights (Clubb, 2014). However, despite the promising results, it is essential to understand that DDR and peacebuilding initiatives during and after a conflict has ended are not the same as P/CVE. In Northern Ireland, for example, the conflict was much more widespread (with terrorist violence emanating from several groups on both sides), the Catholic population faced discrimination, and there was a literal wall dividing the two communities. Moreover, as Alonso (2008) explained, critics see some of the initiatives implemented in Northern Ireland as ineffective because they mainly relied on the perpetrators instead of considering the victims' wishes. In fact, the Northern Irish peace process has long been criticized for failing to

[3] Including the Eradicate Hate Global Summit and the White House United We Stand Summit.

acknowledge the needs and the suffering of victims, centering the narrative on the perpetrators and offering them early release at the expense of the truth and justice (Alonso, 2008). In Spain, where former members of the separatist group ETA have also been involved in peacebuilding efforts, Alonso & Bada (2016) found that many Formers believed the government's efforts were ineffective. Formers stated that they failed to de-legitimize terrorism effectively by justifying their use of violence and claiming that there is a time and place where terrorism is an appropriate tactic. Alonso and Bada (2016) conclude that Formers' "potential for resolving conflict is over presented without any criticism even though they show important limitations and even counterproductive effects" (p. 984).

Another potential problem with the use of Formers is that they often fail to renounce their own prior wrongdoing. Researchers highlight how former IRA members in Northern Ireland (Clubb, 2014) and former ETA terrorists in Spain (Alonso & Bada, 2016) effectively use historical context to sidestep responsibility and fail to renounce violence by claiming that it was needed at the time. In the case of ETA, Alonso & Bada (2016) highlight how countering radicalization with Formers requires "a clear de-legitimization of the violence they have perpetrated and been responsible for" (p. 998). However, ETA Formers failed to clearly and unambiguously de-legitimize terrorism. Instead, their "rhetorical devices" (p. 998) contextualized their acts and legitimized and justified their violence, which runs counter to the essence of deradicalization. Furthermore, the authors emphasize that though it is essential that Formers acknowledge their guilt, this public role is "counterproductive unless it could cause an important damage to ETA" (p. 992), meaning that merely confessing their participation and involvement with ETA did not advance counterterrorism.

Existing Evidence

Evaluating the efficacy of P/CVE efforts is difficult, as are evaluations of prevention programs, in general. P/CVE, in particular, consists of different activities depending on the level of prevention, context, ideological and cultural issues, and individual factors. Further complicating the picture, different participants have different needs, so even within the same program, intervention activities and goals will vary. As a result, outcome data on P/CVE

initiatives is sparse, with extant research having traditionally been descriptive. For example, Mastroe and Szmania (2016) surveyed P/CVE programs and how they were evaluated. They found all studies to be descriptive, with only one having a control group and a quasi-experimental design. Given both the overall dearth of studies as well as the lack of experimental designs in evaluating P/CVE efforts, conclusions that can be drawn from current data must be considered tentative.

With regard to Formers, specifically, there is little evidence regarding their effectiveness in P/CVE efforts. Furthermore, despite the insistence of Formers themselves and their academic, governmental, and community partners, when looking for evidence regarding the effectiveness of Formers, one will be hard-pressed to find any. Nevertheless, within the literature on P/CVE, there exists an assumption of inherent expertise and credibility afforded to Formers (Koehler, 2020). The idea postulates that Formers are better at recognizing signs of radicalization and extremism and that they are best positioned to counter extremist narratives and help bring people back from extremism because they were once part of that world. Intuitively, such an assumption makes sense. However, there is no empirical evidence to support these claims. The few studies that have evaluated Formers' effectiveness in P/CVE activities have provided inconclusive evidence or evidence to the contrary.

For example, Walsh & Gansewig (2019) evaluated a school-based initiative designed and implemented by a Former in the form of class lectures, and found that "contrary to previous assumptions, there were no clearly documented positive effects of the evaluated school-based PVE seminar of a former right-wing extremist on the students when compared to a control group" (p. 109). Furthermore, Walsh and Gansewig (2021) found "multiple questionable aspects of [these] PVE activities" (p. 130) including a lack of transparency and quality standards and Formers who did not voluntarily disengage. Walsh and Gansewig (2021) interviewed practitioners working with Formers in schools in Germany and uncovered several additional concerning issues. They found that the lectures Formers perform do not have a deterrence effect because Formers, taking cues from students, focus mainly on their violent pasts, which glamorizes violence (Gansewig and Walsh, 2021). They also highlighted that Formers lack the pedagogical training to work in schools, and some Formers have not completed the hard work necessary to self-reflect on their actions and past.

Some might argue that Formers do not need to be deradicalized entirely before becoming involved in P/CVE so long as they are disengaged, especially given that we can never reliably know if someone is genuinely deradicalized. However, Walsh and Gansewig (2021) argue that it is problematic and unethical since Formers might still hold unacceptable views and express them in front of students, like the example of one Former who regularly works in schools whom they described as having a "soft attitude toward the Holocaust" (p.128). Practitioners also indicated that Formers are chosen to participate in P/CVE activities in schools based on their personality and charisma, neither of which are characteristics inherent to Formers (Walsh & Gansewig, 2021), further highlighting that Formers do not have skills or characteristics unique *to being a Former* that makes them better than practitioners. Furthermore, other practitioners indicated that some Formers have "exhibitionism in their blood" (Walsh & Gansewig, 2021, p.122), which seems to indicate that their work in P/CVE is motivated by their desire for attention. Even more disquieting, Walsh and Gansewig (2021) cited instances when students were traumatized by the graphic descriptions of violence.

In one of the only studies of Formers' impact on students to include an experimental design, Walsh and Gansewig (2019) evaluated the counternarrative seminars conducted in German schools by a Former with a sample of over 500 students averaging 15 years old. They measured students' attitudes right after the intervention and then again six months later. Participants were asked if they believed they learned anything from the Former, with the majority (80%) indicating they had. The extremist also claimed to reduce sympathy for right-wing extremist views and delinquency. However, the researchers found that his work did not affect delinquency or right-wing extremist attitudes, and in a follow-up six months later, they found no lasting effects on students' interest in learning more about and countering right-wing extremism. Some students stated that they liked the Former's personality and style of lecturing. At the same time, others were uncomfortable with his language and demeanor and found some topics he discussed "too extreme" (p.16). In the end, Walsh and Gansewig (2019) cautioned that students' positive attitudes toward the Former were specific to him and did not automatically extend to all Formers.

The Former also claimed to effectively prevent and counter extremism and crime through his YouTube channel. However, when Gansewig and Walsh (2021) evaluated the 421

videos the Former created, they became more commercial, with 70% of his videos including paid advertising. Moreover, Gansewig and Walsh (2021) concluded that the video content was unsuitable for children or adolescents since the Former frequently exhibited inappropriate behaviors and covered topics such as prostitution. He was also primarily focused on the violence he inflicted, which the researchers note is redundant since "detailed narratives of violent acts are apparently not necessary for knowledge transfer and awareness raising" (Gansewig &Walsh, 2021, p. 162). The negative characteristics, however, might only be found in this Former's work, not all.

In another study focusing on counternarratives, Bélanger et al. (2020) presented participants with three counternarrative messages delivered by different messengers. The narratives had different characteristics. One focused on religious arguments against ISIS and their beliefs, another was about the political goals of groups like ISIS and what they mean for regular people. The third counternarrative focused on the social aspect of ISIS's actions and how they are destroying communities and leaving people with no resources. They found that among three sources, the U.S. government, an Imam, and an ISIS defector, "the most effective source was an ISIS defector followed by an Imam (although marginally)" (p. 7). The team, however, found that "counternarratives involving a social argument [also] backfired when delivered by an ISIS defector or an Imam" (p. 8) which is an important finding invalidating the widespread assumption that Formers are effective in delivering counter messaging campaigns.

Furthermore, in a representative sample of a population of adults in the UK, Koehler, Clubb, Bélanger, Becker, & Williams (2023), asked 2,082 individuals to assess short counter-narratives regarding right-wing extremist recruitment and radicalization. Individuals in the control group were not told who the messenger was whereas the treatment group were told that the four vignettes were from a Former, a victim, a social worker, and a police officer. Participants were asked to rate how credible they found the messenger(s) to be in terms of fairness, accuracy, bias, and completeness. The researchers found that "far-right former extremists are perceived as neither credible nor lacking credibility among the general population, nor are they perceived as credible among a far-right milieu" (p. 3). Their findings challenge the idea that Formers have inherent credibility and, more importantly, found that

Formers carry no weight among their former extremist milieus, which is particularly crucial when involving Formers in deradicalization.

In a randomized controlled effect evaluation of a state-sponsored P/CVE program in Denmark that utilizes Formers, Parker and Lindekilde (2020) studied the effectiveness of a program implemented by a local theater company that consists of a 10-minute monologue followed by a 30-minute discussion moderated by a Former. Researchers used a survey to measure the effectiveness of the performance as it relates to the following: (1) political tolerance, (2) political efficacy, (3) ability to recognize extremist recruitment tactics, (4) ability to recognize extremism and confidence in responding to extremism, (5) perceived legitimacy of political violence, and (6) participant satisfaction with the project. Students attended the performances and were randomly assigned to the control and treatment groups at the *beginning* of each performance. Participants randomly assigned to a control group were asked to answer a series of core questions related to the above aims and questions regarding any previous exposure to extremism *before* the performance. The treatment group answered questions about demographics and previous exposure to extremism before the performance and responded to the core questions asked of the control group *after* the performance. Overall, 2,156 students were surveyed, with 976 in the control group and 955 in the treatment condition. The team sought to establish a baseline of perceptions within the greater Danish population. Therefore, they surveyed an additional 658 high school students who had never participated in the project and were also asked the core questions. Parker and Lindekilde (2020) found that the intervention successfully increased political efficacy but also *decreased* political tolerance. They also found that the program increased student ability to recognize extremist recruitment tactics and their confidence in knowing what to do in case they are exposed to extremism. The study is one of few terrorism-related studies that included a control group and a baseline group. In the end, Parker and Lindekilde concluded that the data "support the assumptions behind existing practices that utilizing former extremists can be a powerful tool" (p. 13) and that their "findings strengthen the existing view that former extremists can play an important and unique role in P/VE" (p. 13). However, that conclusion is misleading. The study does not show that *Formers* are the reason the P/CVE activity was relatively effective; it only indicates that the *counternarrative*, given in this case by a Former,

was successful. To support their claim that their study shows Formers to be effective, they should have compared attitudes before and after the performance between a group that was exposed to the counternarrative delivered *by a Former* versus one that watched the counternarrative but delivered by a non-Former. Future research should make this important distinction.

Formers are also increasingly involved in deradicalization and disengagement activities (Lewis & Marsden, 2021). In a recent relevant study by the RAND Corporation (Brown et al., 2021), researchers interviewed former extremists to understand the factors involved in their deradicalization and disengagement. Of the 32 participants, 22 disengaged without anyone's help. Those who disengaged or deradicalized after an intervention highlighted what made the intervention successful. Among the reasons cited were family and romantic bonds that created stability, financial help which relieved stress and feelings of hopelessness, and emotional support and kindness. None of the factors cited are inherent to being a Former, further demonstrating that Formers are unnecessary for people to disengage. Findings from interviews with former extremists conducted by Gaudette, Scrivens, & Venkatesh (2022) mirror those of the RAND study. Specifically, Gaudette, Scrivens, & Venkatesh (2022) found that the people Formers found most helpful during their disengagement process were those described as "central figures who ... the formers respected and trusted" (p. 6) as well as people "who would not criticize them about their radical views and instead would simply listen to them and communicate, free from judgment" (p. 8). Again, none of these characteristics are unique to being a Former. Furthermore, people have been entering and leaving extremism for years without the help of Formers, further demonstrating that Formers are not required for people to leave. Indeed, many Formers themselves have disengaged or deradicalized without the help of Formers.

Moreover, extremist groups and movements and the terrorism threat landscape are constantly evolving (Englund, 2023; Hoffman, 2021; NIJ, 2017). Therefore, Formers' supposed expertise on their group or movement has an expiration date. For example, a former member of an extremist group in the 80s cannot claim expertise regarding the group's current, more modern face. However, it is not uncommon to see Formers who disengaged years ago claiming expertise in current and future terrorism threats (Feuer, 2022). A similar issue is that

Formers, most likely, went through the deradicalization process only once. So, claiming that their experience makes them experts is a gross overestimation.

Ethical Issues

If the lack of evidence regarding Formers' efficacy in deradicalizing and disengaging people from extremism is not enough, various ethical issues arise from Formers' involvement in P/CVE as well.

Perhaps the most striking is that Formers benefit financially from their crimes and past beliefs. Many successfully monetize on their criminal past, writing books or promoting themselves as subject matter experts on terrorism, or acting as consultants for television shows and research projects. Some have talent agents (Koehler, 2020) responsible for setting up tours and book deals for their clients, and some require upwards of $7,000 for speaking arrangements (Hategan, 2019). Essentially, they are being rewarded for having once been racist, xenophobic, or hateful.

Even if being a Former is not financially lucrative, Formers still benefit from their status; some are famous and treated as celebrities. As Gansewig and Walsh (2021) highlighted, "formers active in public are often treated as celebrities, creating incentives for this commitment that run counter to the idea of prevention (i.e., fame, financial gain) and reinforce persisting in the role of a former extremist" (p. 136). The incentivization of being a Former also creates a competition among Formers on who has the most tragic story, which can motivate people to exaggerate their past, which raises further issues regarding Formers' truthfulness and trustworthiness. As one Former highlighted, the "sob stories" Formers share feed "our thirst for spectator sports and vicarious suffering, …without which former Neo-Nazis would never become rock stars who earn tens of thousands from transforming brutality into community " (Hategan, 2019, n.d.).

Another ethical issue with Formers' stories is that they often utilize a victimhood narrative that can implicitly justify their crimes and violence. For example, various organizations working with or founded by Formers have recently been promoting the idea that hate is an addiction. Addiction has understandably been recognized as a disease, and attitudes

toward addiction and addicts are changing (Sylvester, Haeder, & Callaghan, 2022). More people now understand that people *suffer* from addiction; they do not choose it. Equating racism or xenophobia, for example, with addiction, allows them to frame their extremism as something that *happened* to them, removing both their agency and responsibility.

Another popular narrative among Formers, particularly those in the public eye, is that they became extremists because of personal suffering and longing for a community (Enzinna, 2018; McCloskey, 2022) which could be accurate based on research evidence. The problem with these victimhood narratives, however, especially in the case of right-wing extremists, is that "by divorcing the actions of young neo-nazi recruits from consideration of wider societal norms and institutional structures," we are removing responsibility away from them "and [we are] practically evacuating white supremacist movements of racist or ideological content" (Fekete, 2015, p.94).

Moreover, Formers' generalizations and claims of mental health issues as the root of their extremism ignore that millions of people face adverse circumstances or suffer from mental health issues but never become extremists. Claiming that they became extremists because they had a mental disorder or because of childhood trauma (PBS, 2016) can further stigmatize people with mental health problems. It also further evokes a victimhood narrative that effectively exonerates them from the decisions that led them to become extremists. It implies that their hateful beliefs were not something they had a hand in cultivating through their decisions to create and maintain ties with extremist milieus, but something they had no control over, like a disease, like an addiction.

Some combine their stories of victimhood with descriptions of their time in the extremist milieu that are also problematic, such as describing themselves as “America’s most notorious neo-Nazi” (Jeff Schoep, n.d.). They speak about their extremist pasts the way someone attempts to prop up their resume, lauding their role in spreading hate as if that is something to be proud of, something to advertise. Furthermore, many times, it is impossible to verify their stories (Fekete, 2015).

Involvement in unregulated activities spearheaded by or involving Formers is also a professional minefield. In the following paragraph, I focus on the ethical principles guiding my field, psychology, but other academics and practitioners involved in P/CVE research and

implementation should look to their professional guidelines and codes of conduct to determine what ethical issues arise from working with Formers.

Psychologists in the P/CVE space, who promote Formers or initiatives that involve Formers and claim that Formers are effective in deradicalization or counternarratives, may be in violation of some of the basic ethical APA principles. For example, since there is no evidence to support the idea that Formers are effective messengers (and recent evidence has shown otherwise) or can effectively deradicalize people, when psychologists promote Formers or their organizations, they are violating the principle of integrity, which states that "psychologists seek to promote accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness in science, teaching, and practice" (APA, 2017). Furthermore, by failing to vet Formers and the organizations they work with adequately to ensure that when Formers are involved in interventions, they are *qualified* to provide the services they claim to be providing, psychologists also violate the principle of fidelity and responsibility that psychologists should be "concerned about the ethical compliance of their colleagues' scientific and professional conduct" (APA, 2017). In addition, when psychologists write that Formers should be included in P/CVE despite the lack of evidence, they also fail to make statements grounded in our "professional knowledge, training, or experience *in accord with appropriate psychological literature*" (APA, 2017). The same would be true for academics, despite their area of research.

Formers' insights into their journeys have helped researchers better understand how and who becomes an extremist, and their insights have been valuable. However, it is unethical for Formers with no training to claim expertise in terrorism. They are, at best, experts in their *own* narrative. Formers claiming broader expertise and making generalizations based on their own experiences is highly unethical and dangerous, especially when they dabble in topics they not only lack expertise in but also lack experience in, such as one Former claiming to deprogram "Trump cultists" (McAlleer, 2021) or another Former discussing the motivations behind the Las Vegas shooting (CNN, n.d.).[4]

Another ethical issue arising from the professionalization of Formers is that they are entrusted with deradicalizing people while having no or minimal training. Untrained and unqualified Formers might harm the individuals they are entrusted to help since they do not

[4] A two-year long investigation by the FBI was unable to discern what drove the shooter to act (Romo, 2019).

have the right educational or professional skills and tools to help them. This issue is particularly important for psychologists or other clinicians working with Formers since they are expected to protect clients and do no harm.

Furthermore, a cursory examination of some Formers' LinkedIn and personal sites, shows that most do not have a bachelor's degree or a higher degree in social work, psychology, counseling, or related disciplines. Some claim expertise in trauma or terrorism because they have completed online certificates that are far from adequate when claiming to be treating people of their trauma. More importantly, Formers sometimes act as deradicalization specialists in legal cases (Nguyen & Zahzah, n.d.). In that capacity, they might be asked to assess an individual's deradicalization. With no training in threat assessment or a deeper understanding of psychopathology or the psychology of extremism, they are not qualified to make such judgments. For example, recent court documents from the case against Ty Garbin (US v. Garbin, 2021), one of the defendants accused of plotting to kidnap and kill Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer, highlight the dangerousness and unethical nature of this issue. In the report, the organization asked to assess Garbin, determined and advocated for him to receive the minimum sentence the law allows. However, there is no mention of any risk or threat assessments used to evaluate him and there is barely any mention of his radical beliefs or the current status of his radicalization. Furthermore, the organization's clinicians[5] claim that Garbin "engages in delayed processing" (p. 8), which is not an official DSM diagnosis. It is also unclear how delayed processing is related to becoming an extremist.

Some Formers themselves seem to recognize the ethically murky waters they operate in and seek to sidestep responsibility and accountability by calling themselves peace activists or interventionists, titles that mean nothing and, therefore, cannot be regulated. Because if they were to call themselves trauma specialists or psychotherapists, they would be required *by law* to abide by specific licensing and educational standards, professional and ethical guidelines, and codes of conduct. Certain organizations claiming to offer deradicalization and disengagement services are slowly becoming more professionalized, which is a welcomed step forward. However, given their national reach (through helplines), an organization that

[5] It is unclear if the organization's clinicians are licensed to practice in Michigan.

might, for example, be based in Massachusetts could have clients from other jurisdictions. Nevertheless, it is unclear if the P/CVE practitioners involved in these activities are licensed to practice in all states, raising ethical *and* legal issues. Therefore, clinicians, academics, and other practitioners working with Formers need to ensure that doing so does not undermine the ethical guidelines they are expected to follow. Finally, when clinicians are involved in P/CVE cases with Formers, their credentials give credence and legitimacy to the Formers and their organizations just by virtue of being associated with them. Judges and others involved in the legal cases or P/CVE activities with extremists, will likely rely on those credentials and might not know that the Formers are not qualified or that the clinicians are not licensed to practice in particular states.

Another popular narrative among some Formers is that they deradicalized because someone from their potential victim pool was nice to them (Saslow, 2018). This might also very well be true. However, such claims put the onus on the victims and society to help extremists not be hateful. This is an issue with P/CVE broadly, particularly programs such as the Exit franchise that tend to "sideline anti-racist frameworks in favour of muted anti-extremism perspectives by…former neo-nazis, who, unlike their victims, have never been at the receiving end of racist violence, and yet are now treated as experts on the roots of prejudice" (Fekete, 2015, p. 97).

Also, the idea that lived experience equals expertise is unreasonable. Would we be okay with children struggling with mental health issues receiving therapy from an untrained former mental health patient? Educational and professional requirements exist to protect everyone, the clients as well as the professionals. Suppose Formers want to claim they are deradicalizing or helping people disengage from extremism. In that case, they need to invest the time, money, and energy other professionals do to acquire the required professional skills, knowledge, and experience.

Many proponents highlight how helpful it is for Formers to be involved in specific aspects of P/CVE, which is understandable. However, there is no reason for them to be financially benefiting too. Knowing that they might support individuals and give back to their communities should be enough for those *genuinely* motivated to atone for their past, and fame and money should not be part of the equation. Some also argue that people can change, and

we should applaud them for doing so. I agree. However, acknowledging that someone has changed and taken steps to improve themselves does not and should not require special treatment. Formers should not be rewarded (financially or otherwise) for doing something that many, if not the majority, of people, do every day, and that is not being extremists.

Furthermore, a quick survey of the current list of Formers operating in the public eye reveals a typical profile of a professional Former, a White male. There are also several White women, but it is rare to see a professional Former who belongs to a minority group, especially those often victimized by Formers and their former movements. We live in a society that privileges White men, so it might not be surprising that White men draw most of the attention even within extremism. However, we should all be puzzled that in an industry that is often criticized for presenting minorities as high risk for mobilizing to terrorism (Weine, 2015), the most prominent Formers now involved in P/CVE are primarily White.

Of course, we cannot discuss the ethical implications and issues associated with professional Formers without a much-needed examination of the role of academia in supporting, promoting, and elevating Formers. As noted earlier, it seemed intuitive to claim that Formers had inherent credibility regarding terrorism when the field was new. However, we continue to promote and glorify Formers as experts and skilled practitioners and frequently fail to question and critically examine the different roles they play in P/CVE. We participate in panels and conferences that elevate Formers as experts in terrorism or as effective deradicalization practitioners and fail to critically question their claims of expertise and generalizations based solely on their own experience. We are also responsible for *still* making theoretical claims about their assumed expertise and effectiveness in P/CVE with no evidence to back these assertions and for failing to research their effectiveness with the appropriate scientific methodologies.

Current Solutions and Recommendations

In recent years, Formers have been operating as part of multidisciplinary teams that include therapists, social workers, theologians, and others deemed to be able to help. Indeed, this is a much more preferred solution than having untrained Formers trying to deal with the issues

arising when people decide to leave extremism. However, Formers are still part of P/CVE, and the issues that come with that are still present. Specifically, Formers can still profit from their past and claim to deradicalize and disengage people from extremism effectively, though what exactly it is they do is unclear. The issues arising from Formers claiming expertise in terrorism are also there, and the evidence regarding their effectiveness is still non-existent. Also, no one is stopping Formers from establishing their own P/CVE organizations without the multidisciplinary teams that are currently being utilized.

Furthermore, since Formers are the ones establishing P/CVE organizations, they often collaborate with 'multidisciplinary' teams, including individuals with no experience, expertise, or even basic knowledge of terrorism and counterterrorism processes. Because there are no standards of who or what a multidisciplinary team means, Former-established and other P/CVE organizations get away with having people with no experience in the field, such as life coaches or former police officers with no experience working terrorism cases, offering deradicalization services.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Those Supporting P/CVE Research

The field of P/CVE is entirely unregulated, which is one of the reasons that problems, including the rise of the professional Former, arise. Though regulation through legislation is unlikely, the federal government and private organizations funding P/CVE and terrorism research can move towards establishing certain industry norms to promote transparency and accountability.

1. First, funders must ensure that the projects and organizations they fund meet specific standards by requesting that all individuals involved be vetted to ensure they are qualified to participate, meaning they fulfill all required educational and professional training requirements related to their responsibilities. For example, if Formers are involved in counseling, they should be extensively trained in clinical social work or psychology and be licensed to practice in their state.
2. Funders should also require that all projects receiving funding have clear and measurable goals that can be evaluated and mandate that independent experts evaluate all projects. Evaluations should include all stakeholders, including community leaders,

parents, teachers, and other gatekeepers, and should focus on P/CVE-related metrics, such as extremist beliefs and political violence approval, instead of abstract concepts, such as deradicalization. Evaluation results should then be communicated to the funding body and stakeholders who could benefit from implementing P/CVE programs.

3. Funding agencies should require that all their partners, including researchers, abide by clear guidelines that ensure that P/CVE services are based on scientific evidence and ethical codes. This is particularly important for people working with juveniles.[6]
4. To bypass the ethical issues arising from professional Formers, funding organizations should request that Formers involved in project activities remain anonymous to avoid creating celebrity Formers.
5. Funding organizations should also require complete transparency regarding activities, practitioners' and Formers' qualifications, data, metrics, and evaluation results. All relevant information should be accessible to everyone, including the public, researchers, and journalists.
6. Policymakers should also create guidelines with the latest evidence on the efficacy of Formers and P/CVE activities for judges and other individuals involved in the legal system. Since judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys might interact with extremist individuals, they should be trained to understand the intricacies of radicalization, deradicalization, and disengagement. Doing so will enable them to understand what punishment might be best suited for each individual and know whether solutions they might consider, such as P/CVE activities, are proven effective, when, how, and when delivered by whom.

Recommendations for Researchers and Practitioners

1. Researchers should focus on evaluating existing P/CVE activities. Evaluations of P/CVE programs should be the priority of the field. Experts on evaluations are an invaluable asset, and academics working on P/CVE research should partner with community

[6] A great example of ethical guidelines related to P/CVE work are those guiding the work of Moonshot, available in the Additional Resources section at the end of this paper.

psychologists and other evaluation experts who are adept at working with communities and policymakers alike.

- By evaluating P/CVE initiatives, we will be more informed about what activities work and can further explore their relationship to mobilization and changes in beliefs. For example, if we find that mentoring works, we can compare mentoring by a Former to mentoring by a peer mentor to see if Formers are inherently more effective. However, due to the lack of evaluation data from existing P/CVE programs, we do not even know what might work.

2. Researchers working with P/CVE organizations should adequately vet the organizations and their staff to ensure they meet ethical standards. This is particularly important since academics working with Formers can help legitimize them and their work.
3. Before academics agree to work with Formers and their organizations, they need to ensure that they are qualified to conduct P/CVE activities, their staff is appropriately trained, and that they meet the ethical standards researchers abide by, including confidentiality and privacy. The same applies to academics having Formers' lecture at their schools or universities.
4. The uncritical platforming of Formers needs to end. When sharing a platform with Formers, researchers need to question their expertise and ensure that they share conference panels and other professional settings with individuals trained and qualified to carry out the activities they claim to be offering. This is *especially* important for established terrorism scholars who yield power in the field and whose opinions are valued and respected.
5. P/CVE researchers should establish conferences and professional organizations that can disseminate research on P/CVE (including the role of Formers) to the right audience, such as the media, judges, politicians, and policymakers. Such organizations could lobby for the appropriate funding for research into P/CVE effectiveness and create new ethical guidelines for researchers and practitioners of P/CVE, including if, how, and when to work with Formers.
6. There are many self-proclaimed terrorism experts, and the unregulated and fluid nature of the field allows individuals to claim expertise with no or minimal knowledge and

experience (Stampnitzky, 2013). Therefore, the field should move towards clearly delineating its empirical standards by establishing professional organizations that could control "the production and certification of legitimate experts" (Stampnitzky, 2013, p. 12). A good example has been the call by some to establish a critical terrorism studies area of research and teaching (Smyth, Gunning, Jackson, Kassimeris, & Robinson, 2008; Jackson, 2007a; Jackson, 2007b).

7. Terrorism research needs to become more methodologically rigorous. Traditionally, terrorism research has been challenging because there is rarely a control group, and access to terrorists is hard. However, control groups can and should be incorporated into research on P/CVE, including the effectiveness of Formers. For example, one randomized group can be exposed to a counternarrative delivered by a Former. Another random group (in the same context) can be exposed to the same counternarrative delivered by someone else. Quasi-experimental studies are also feasible and might help us avoid some of the external validity issues that could affect studies on P/CVE. For example, suppose certain areas or schools seem to have a higher incidence of mobilization or have a high number of students expressing White supremacist beliefs. In that case, counternarratives at those schools could be tested in a quasi-experimental design. Some students (within the same school or neighborhood) could be exposed to a counternarrative while others are not. Pre- and post-test questionaries could help us understand if certain counternarratives work with specific populations. The same design can also be used to study the effectiveness of Formers.

Recommendations for the Media

Journalists and media outlets should critically examine their platforming of Formers. Though it might be a good story to have a Former Neo-Nazi speak about the dangers of the extreme right, it also sensationalizes them and their past. Instead, journalists, when dealing with Formers, particularly right-wing extremists need to focus on the suffering Formers caused and understand that their (former) beliefs are part of a White supremacist system. Allowing Formers to separate those beliefs from their current narratives allows them to be seen as victims of injustices and legitimizes their grievances. It is also critical to vet Formers' stories of deradicalization. There have been specific high-profile cases of individuals claiming

to be deradicalized or disengaged but still in contact with and protecting other extremists (Kelly & DeCook, 2022). Finally, media stories, particularly from reputable sources and journalists, play an important role in our society. However, journalists and other media sources have a responsibility not only to vet, but also question and push back on Formers' claims of effectively deradicalizing extremists since their stories can be influential. Narratives on Formers are also Former-centric, meaning they focus on Formers' claims surrounding their participation in hate movements and the difficulties they experienced when they decided to disengage. What is missing from popular media profiles of Formers, however, are their victims' stories and experiences which are mostly erased or ignored (for example, PBS NewsHour, 2016). Finally, journalists interviewing Formers fail to question their claims of Formers' effectiveness in P/CVE or their supposed credentials and expertise to speak on matters pertaining to political violence and rehabilitation, or the ethical issues arising from their work (Bradley & Abbas, 2021; Lazar, 2023; Reeves, 2017).

Conclusion

The ethical issues arising from supporting the burgeoning industry of professional Formers are too critical to ignore anymore. When research on P/CVE was nascent a decade ago, it was understandable for academics, practitioners, and government officials to promote Formers as one of the solutions to terrorism and P/CVE. However, research on their potential efficacy has not materialized. In the rare instances when researchers evaluate their effectiveness, the evidence does not support the assumptions underlying Formers' involvement in P/CVE, namely that they have inherent expertise and credibility, and it is clear that Formers are neither needed nor required for individuals to disengage or deradicalize. If Formers want to support individuals exiting extremism, they can do so anonymously and voluntarily and with honesty about what they are offering. However, as researchers and practitioners who regularly consult with the government and speak to journalists and news media, we must base our decisions on evidence, not hunches and assumptions, however intuitive they might be. As psychologists, academics, and practitioners, we can help advance the field of P/CVE without compromising the ethical and moral principles that guide our fields, and it starts with a critical

and honest examination of the ethical issues arising from Formers' inclusion in P/CVE and our role in the rise of the professional Former.

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JOURNAL FOR DERADICALIZATION

Summer 2023
No. 35
ISSN: 2363-9849

About the JD Journal for Deradicalization

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