

Counseling towards the Deradicalization of Islamist Extremists: An Overview of Approaches Based on Two Qualitative Interview Studies with Prevention Practitioners in Germany

Yannick von Lautz^{a1}, Eike Bösing^b, Mehmet Kart^c, Margit Stein^d

^aResearch Associate & Academic Coordinator, Center for Radicalization Research and Prevention, IU International University, ^bResearch Associate, University Vechta, ^cProfessor for Social Work, IU International University, ^dProfessor & Chair of General Pedagogy, University Vechta

Abstract

Over the past decade Islamist mobilization has resulted in numerous departures from Germany towards the civil war zones of Syria and Iraq. As a determined response to this trend, the scope of prevention efforts in Germany has increased significantly, combatting Islamist radicalization at the federal and state level with a variety of projects and approaches. This article analyzes the approaches to counseling by deradicalization practitioners in Germany, based on two qualitative interview studies (n=25) and (n=9) with experts in secondary and tertiary prevention. Drawing on the experiential and interpretative knowledge of the interviewees, we identified four prevalent approaches to deradicalization, composed of activity-oriented concepts that explain counseling efforts within a specific set of goals, contents, methods, and techniques. Herein imperatives of action are, firstly, religiously and/or ideologically oriented, secondly, oriented towards acceptance, thirdly, systemically oriented, and lastly, oriented towards life management. However, these are not static approaches, characterized by oft-intersecting efforts. Our findings indicate that confrontational means of dealing with the ideological are uncommon, even though in theory ideological reappraisal is widely considered a core objective of deradicalization practices. More emphasis is placed on an appreciative relationship between counselors and clients as well as collaborations with other support systems and institutions to meet individual needs. Further to this, this article discusses our findings with regard to the theoretical and empirical research framework, taking into account interdisciplinary perspectives as well as experiences from the prevention of right-wing extremism.

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Introduction

The eruption of the Syrian civil war in 2011 catalyzed the mobilization of Islamist factions in Germany, initiating migratory movements of foreign jihadist fighters towards Syria and Iraq, which again in 2014 picked up speed as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (IS/ISIL)

¹ Corresponding Author Contact: Yannick von Lautz; Email: yannick.von-lautz@iu.org; Bonner Str. 271, 50968 Köln

began to emerge. This resulted in the departure of more than 1150 German jihadist fighters (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2022, p. 185), many of whom were young adults (Bundeskriminalamt, 2016). In response, civil society and state actors intensified and diversified their efforts to prevent and counter Islamist radicalization, leading to a 36% increase in the number of preventive projects between the years 2018 and 2021 (Michaelis & Kemmesies, 2022). Respective Projects counter not only those jihadists with violent intent – who make up a mere fraction of Islamists in Germany – but also face undemocratic and socially corrosive tendencies as well as group-focused enmity, with elements of Islamist radicalization threatening social cohesion (Trautmann & Zick, 2016; Freiheit et al., 2021, Michaelis & Kemmesies, 2022).

While much of the scholarly discourse initially focused on the problem's genesis, there is a growing interest in finding out how *deradicalization* works – not least due to the gradual return of jihadist fighters (Benz, 2023). However, amidst ongoing theoretical debates concerning terminologies and processes of deradicalization, little empirical research has been conducted on the experiential knowledge of professionals in prevention and intervention, who have accumulated a great deal of practical experience working with radicalized people.

Building on the theoretical and empirical groundwork undertaken on approaches to deradicalization (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Rabasa et al., 2010; El-Mafaalani et al., 2016; Koehler, 2016; Waleciak, 2021), this article analyzes and discusses the modus operandi of practitioners in Germany based on two qualitative interview studies (Study A: n=25 and study B: n=9) with experts in the German field of action. The interviews, as part of the research project 'Distanz'², spotlight the experiential and interpretative knowledge of the interviewees acquired in their respective institutions and projects as well as in their actual work with clients.

The leading questions of the article are:

- What are the approaches that contribute to deradicalization and disengagement from the perspective of agents of prevention?
- Which approaches are used de facto by practitioners and why?

² <https://www.forschungsverbund-deradikalisierung.de/projekt-distanz-1>.

- How can the various deradicalization practices in casework be categorized according to their underlying activity-oriented concepts?

(De)Radicalization – a short terminological outline

Many of the stage models that have been developed to explain Islamist radicalization describe it as a multi-phase process leading to the use of violence (Moghaddam, 2005; Silber & Bhatt, 2007). However, cognitive radicalization, which dispenses with violent means, is also common (Abay Gaspar et al., 2018). Scientific discourse on the subject therefore mostly distinguishes between a *cognitive* and a *violent* orientation of radicalization (Vidino, 2010; Neumann, 2013). We thusly adopt a wider understanding of (de)radicalization, including all phenotypes, violent and/or cognitive, invoking Islamist ideologies that threaten security and social cohesion.

Current discussions on the path leading away from extremist attitudes and behavior are mostly centered around the concepts of *disengagement* and *deradicalization*.

On the one hand, Horgan (2008) describes *disengagement* as a result of an individual or collective process through which a behavioral change takes place that does not necessarily lead to a re-evaluation or re-orientation of respective attitudes, stressing that a mere refrain from physical terrorist acts does not necessarily imply a withdrawal from ideological support. Disengagement is rather a process in which a person undergoes a change in his or her role or function that is usually accompanied by a reduction in the use of violence (Altier et al., 2014; Horgan & Braddock, 2010). Drawing a line between the two concepts, “disengagement from terrorism often occurs without de-radicalisation” (Schmid, 2013, p. 21).

On the other hand, *deradicalization* can generally be understood as a cognitive and behavioral process of withdrawal from radical views and courses of action (Horgan, 2008; Schmid, 2013; Braddock, 2014). Rabasa et al. (2010) regard it as the gold standard of preventive policy, since a fundamental change in ideological understanding is accompanied by a reduced likelihood of relapse. However, empirical findings indicate that the step of disengagement appears to be a more tangible and realistic goal (Horgan, 2009). Taking preliminaries from criminology into account, Köhler (2013, p. 26, AT) stresses the complexity and perdurability of deradicalization processes, which “means that deradicalization is neither a singular moment nor a linear development”. Based on a

processual understanding of radicalization, Neumann (2013, p. 7, AT³) states that “at first glance, the simplest way of looking at deradicalization is as a reversal of the process by which a person became an extremist”. Also, Demant et al. (2008, p. 13) describe deradicalization as “the opposite of radicalisation: it is the process of becoming less radical. This process of ‘becoming less radical’ applies both to behavior and beliefs” (Demant et al, 2008, p. 13). This notion appears oversimplified, since deradicalization can hardly mean the mere reversal of the radicalization process; in this case, the person in question would return to the starting point of radicalization which initially laid the ground for radicalization (Baaken et al., 2019; Rabasa et al., 2010). As shown by the results of a systematic literature review of post-2017 research on disengagement and deradicalization by Morrison et al. (2021) on which the *Phoenix Model of Disengagement and Deradicalisation from Terrorism and Violent Extremism* (Silke et al., 2021) is based, for a large part, the “rebirth of pre-existing elements of identity – provides the foundation of the disengagement and deradicalisation processes” (Silke et al. 2021, p. 5). Further, the model illustrates that disengagement and deradicalization are multifactorially determined processes, gradually leading towards an identity transformation that is determined by an interplay of “actor, psychological and environmental catalysts” (Silke et al. 2021, p. 3) as well as filters that may have positive or negative impacts (Silke et al. 2021, p. 3-5).

Deradicalization practices

Following Koehler (2016) and Waleciak (2021), we refer to deradicalization work as programs and projects that aim to achieve a severing of associations between extremist ideology and the index clientele. Regarding the German landscape of deradicalization and disengagement programs Koehler (2016, p. 120) notes

As a main factor of critique, the field of deradicalization work is currently far from establishing comprehensive standards, definitions, and concepts, even in a single country (e.g., Germany). Thus, these programs are mainly operating under their own definitions and approaches, without specific forms of external guidelines, certified training, or coherent evaluation.

³ All translations are marked with the abbreviation AT (Authors Translation).

Aware of this definitional blurriness, we nevertheless need a practicable term for orientation. For such a reason we subsume, in a manner akin to Waleciak (2021), the diverse terminologies and objectives of deradicalization and disengagement programs in Germany under the umbrella term ‘deradicalization practices’. This appears to be a pragmatic solution to the difficulty of capturing the range of highly individual processes of (de)radicalization that may take place on a behavioral and a cognitive level.

To categorize deradicalization efforts within the diverse field of preventive action, the scientific discourse predominantly uses definitions of measures which classify temporal points of intervention (primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention) (Caplan, 1964) and specifics of the target groups (universal, selective, indicated prevention) (Gordon, 1983). Ceylan and Kiefer (2018) point out that these tripartite systems of categorization are commonly mixed up by the prevention practitioners in Germany, as they view them as synonymous and group them accordingly. In a nutshell, *primary or universal prevention* aims to strengthen social cohesion through projects in the spirit of a free, diverse, and democratic society; its measures do not pre-define and address risk-based target groups. Thus, primary or universal prevention is clearly distinguished from deradicalization practices. *Secondary or selective prevention* deals with individuals or groups that are considered particularly vulnerable to the risks of Islamist radicalization. These risks are mostly defined as individual, social, socio-spatial, material, and political risk factors for Islamist radicalization and are also supported by empirical findings (Srowig et al., 2018, Kanol, 2022, Bundeskriminalamt, 2016). While El-Mafaalani et al. (2016) do not locate secondary or selective prevention within the sphere of deradicalization, it is evident that some projects formally placed in this category determine target groups based on the moment of intervention at the early stages of radicalization. The federal-state program *Wegweiser* for example, provides counseling sessions and support to young people who have gone through behavioral changes in the context of Islamist radicalization (Ministerium des Innern des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, n.d.). Under the condition of an intended early withdrawal from Islamist attitudes and behaviors through counseling, we thus include secondary and selective prevention practices in our analyses of deradicalization efforts. *Tertiary or indicated prevention* is the core area of deradicalization practices. It concerns people who show clear signs of radicalization, most obviously manifested in corresponding criminal acts, also perpetrated abroad for example, by

returning jihadist fighters. Likewise, clients that are not associated with violence or crime are supported in their detachment from Islamist ideologies and groups. Drawing on such categorization this study focuses on the experiential knowledge of practitioners from secondary and selective and more explicitly from tertiary and indicated preventive work in the German field of deradicalization practices.

Approaches to deradicalization

In an international study on deradicalization programs, Rabasa et al. (2010) distinguish between three components that constitute the respective programs' agenda: the affective, the pragmatic, and the ideological. The authors conclude that in order to break the commitment to the Islamist worldviews and organizations it is essential to work on an ideological level towards an ideological dismantlement, to provide pragmatic support in dealing with life issues, such as education or securing a stable income, and to strengthen emotional bonds, on an affective level, with family and friends outside Islamist groups. Also, Koehler (2016, p. 80) remarks in his detailed analysis of international disengagement and deradicalization practices that "one important aspect is that successful disengagement or deradicalization involves both the exit from the extremist milieu and the re-engagement of the non-extremist environment". He further provides a structural analysis of deradicalization practices on an institutional level, citing as of particular importance institutional background (governmental/ civil society/ public-private partnerships) with regard to the relevance of ideological components and either active or passive engagement, expressing how and by which actors they are applied. In addition, he gives a detailed overview of the concrete methods and tools applied in deradicalization and disengagement practices (vocational training and education, psychological counseling, victim perpetrator dialogue, to name some of the in total thirteen methods and tools). Remaining in a predominantly German context, El-Mafaalani et al. (2016) single out three central approaches to deradicalization which aims to counter the phenomenon of Neo-Salafism: systemic counseling, outreach approaches, and religious counseling. While systemic counseling is regarded as a rather holistic approach, covering the affective, pragmatic, and ideological, outreach work is considered more a means of establishing contact with potential clients, whereas the religious approach is described as

content-related counseling, intending to achieve a change of mind influenced by discussions on Islamic theology.

The first empirically-based systematization of German deradicalization practices was conducted by Waleciak (2021), drawing on 19 expert interviews. Waleciak's work is groundbreaking in that it subsumes all methods, procedures, concepts, techniques, and tools identified in the interviews into a broader methodological concept. Four different approaches are categorized herein: socio-economic approaches that consist of "methods that aim to improve the material living conditions of the index clientele" (Waleciak, 2021, p. 126; AT); systemic approaches that intend to help the clientele within their specific system of relationships and communicative structures, including interpretational references within these systems; psycho-social approaches that aim for an improvement of "psychological and emotional well-being" (Waleciak, 2021, p. 131; AT); and ideological approaches pursuing the "detachment from Islamist ideologies" (Waleciak, 2021, p. 133; AT).

To pick up on this categorization, a screening of the research data from our first interview study with experts (n=25) gave indication of an addition of an acceptance-oriented approach used in the field action (Kart et al., in press). This inspired us to conduct an in-depth and methodologically sound (re-)evaluation of the data, in combination with an analysis of the second case-centered interview study (n=9).

Methods

The empirical data for this paper consists of two qualitative guide-based interview studies (study A: n=25 and study B: n=9) with experts from various fields of prevention and intervention work. In study A, the experts were questioned in broad terms about their experiences from undertaking casework. To match the general knowledge from study A with specific cases, study B was additionally conducted in the form of case-centered interviews. Building on an initial overview of counseling approaches compiled from the data of study A (Kart et al., in press), the material was re-evaluated and analyzed in conjunction with the findings of study B allowing for the creation of a methodologically-substantiated overview of the deradicalization and disengagement practices in Germany.

Interview Guidelines

The interview guidelines used in study A are divided into the following thematic sections:

- (1) The structural framework of the counseling activities,
- (2) The process of turning towards Islamism
- (3) The operations of and professional approaches to deradicalization and disengagement.

In study B stronger focus is put on the clients' individual backgrounds. Therefore, section 1 focuses on biographical matters, while sections 2 and 3 remain concerned with the same subject matter only with modified questions referring to the clients' personal histories and experiences throughout the process. In the run-up to the interview studies the guidelines were discussed in a hands-on practitioner workshop and modified accordingly. Throughout the creation process both interview guidelines a and b were critically reviewed for suitability to the subject matter and its applicability with both scientists and practitioners from the expert advisory board of the research project 'Distanz'.

Sampling

The selection of the interview partners and cases was conducted following the principle of a *theoretical sampling* in such a way that the greatest possible theoretical knowledge value could be generated (Döring & Bortz, 2016). In consultation with the scientists and practitioners from the expert advisory board, the field of action was narrowed down to secondary and tertiary prevention and intervention programs (Ceylan & Kiefer, 2018). As a recruiting strategy for study A all relevant programs to be found on the *MAPEX-Platform* (MAPEX, n.d.), which systematically lists prevention and intervention programs in Germany, were contacted via mail. The same procedure was applied to the database *Datenbank: Prävention von Islamismus & Beratung* (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, n.d.) and in addition several open online searches were carried out. For study B, existing contacts were reached out to, and interactions with some promising new projects were initiated according to the selection procedure described below.

In study A diverse institutional affiliations, professions, and main areas of work were considered in the selection of the interview partners from secondary and tertiary prevention: 16 of the interviewees worked in programs for civil society organizations; four worked in security agency exit programs; three worked in governmental prevention institutions without any connection to the security agencies. Three experts worked at security authorities, primarily in charge of coordination tasks.⁴ The experts' professions and academic backgrounds were predominantly in the fields of social work, pedagogy, religious studies, Islamic studies, and Islamic theology. A thorough vetting of interview partners from a comprehensive selection pool was made in order to draw conclusions with regard to the country as a whole.

In study B, professionals within the scope of secondary and tertiary prevention were approached for in-depth, case-centered interviews. The selection of the practitioners was based on the relevance of their institutional affiliation and the pertinence of their activities in the field of action. Accordingly, the type of counseling and/or exit program as well as the nature and mode of operation of the counseling program and its geographical location were considered relevant determinant factors.

On the individual case level, and with regard to the characteristics of the respective cases, as well as the directions that the casework was taking, diversity was emphasized throughout the sampling process. In coordination with the practitioners, an attempt was made to reflect the wide spectrum of addressees from the scientific literature. Age was a key criterion of selection, focusing on individuals that were radicalized in adolescence or early adulthood. Special consideration was given to the criteria of gender, refugee background, and special socialization characteristics. With respect to the course of the counseling work, it was intended to treat of cases as holistically as possible, dealing with those with and without a violent orientation, those with and without criminal prosecution, as well as cases that successfully turned away from Islamism or dropped out of the counseling process altogether.

⁴ One interview in study A and four interviews in study B were conducted with two experts. For the analysis, only interviews that are self-referentially related to counseling work could be used to compile respective approaches. The interviews with the three coordinative security agency actors are therefore not quoted directly, however, they were included as a relevant factor in the contextual understanding of deradicalization practices.

Data Collection

The collection of data for study A was carried out between September and December 2021, with some interviews conducted via video call due to COVID-19 restrictions and some in person. The data for study B was obtained in person between November 2022 and February 2023. For this purpose, counseling centers were visited throughout the country and on-site meetings were held on the premises. All interviews, ranging from one to three hours, were recorded with a voice recorder and transcribed in accordance with an adapted version of the transcription rules of Kuckartz (2010).

All participants were informed in advance via written information sheet about the proceedings of the research project and gave their consent prior to the interview. They were also informed that they could revoke their participatory consent at any time without giving reasons and without disadvantage. All meetings followed the respective local health regulations.

Method of Analysis

First stage of analysis for Study A: For the analysis of the data material, techniques oriented toward the qualitative content analysis of Mayring (2015) and Kuckartz (2016) were adopted. In a first full assessment of the data an initially a-priori deductive category system consisting of thematic codes and mainly drawing on the interview guidelines as well as the findings of Rabasa et al. (2010), El-Mafaalani et al. (2016), Koehler (2016), and Waleciak (2021) was extended by inductive (sub)categories. With regard to the coding unit, it was established as a criterion that its meaning must remain comprehensible even outside of its context. In the next step, all relevant statements about the approaches, methods and techniques of counseling as well as information on the counselors' professional working practices, academic backgrounds/training, and the individual characteristics of the clients were integrated in a code book. The coding process was then carried out by two of the authors, who had advanced training in qualitative analysis. As a criterion of reliability, a pretest was conducted to strengthen inter-coder agreement. The method of "consensual coding" (Kuckartz, 2016, p. 211, AT) was employed in two full interviews. Both interviews were coded separately, and the researchers then compared them and discussed whether the respective text passages were assigned to the same categories. The same procedure was

applied to the entirety of the data on the basis of random samples. In addition, particularly critical text passages were marked and cross-checked by both researchers.

First stage of analysis for Study B: Due to the difference in the nature of the data material of Study B in comparison to Study A, the initial means of structuring content was broadened, needing only to adhere to the categorization “approaches to and methods of deradicalization practices”, with a view to firstly extricating larger sections from their larger case-based, semantic contexts. Specific subcategories were assigned in the second, more detailed analytical stage. All references in the case-based accounts with reference to approaches to counseling, methods and techniques as well as the underlying concepts of the counselors were included in the main category. The reduced coding procedure, again working with two coders, was conducted, tested, and discussed in the same way as in Study A.

Second stage of analysis for Studies A & B: For further analysis case-based thematic summaries and abstractions were created (Kuckartz, 2016). On the basis of case-related thematic matrices created in this course, category-based analyses were carried out within as well as between main categories and subcategories (Kuckartz, 2016; Mayring, 2015). The aim was to abstract and systematize patterns and contextual factors in order to decoct the experts’ (interpretive) knowledge. The cases of Study B were at this stage also analyzed by comparing and contrasting them against the counselors’ professional working practices and backgrounds, as well as the individual characteristics of the clients.

By interpreting and comparing the interviews, the subjective dimensions of the experts’ knowledge were reconstructed and conceptualizations of implicit and explicit knowledge were elaborated. In addition to technical and experience-based knowledge, interpretive knowledge, including the “subjective relevancies, rules, perceptions, and interpretations” (Bogner & Menz, 2001, p. 484; AT), was of particular interest in the following, analytically attained by abstraction and systematization.

Dimensions of analysis

As Kreft and Müller (2019, p. 12; AT) lament in terms of the equivocal use of the term ‘method’, “one has the impression that everything that has something to do with organized, planned action is placed under the umbrella term ‘methods’”. For such a reason a more precise delineation of what constitutes methods and approaches is called for.

This analysis is guided by a broader definition of methodologies, differentiating concepts, methods, and techniques (Geißler & Hege, 2007; Kreft & Müller, 2019). We define *approaches* as activity-oriented *concepts* that coherently explain a set of goals, contents, methods, and techniques in a condensed model of action (for example, community orientation in prevention). Accordingly, *methods* are a constitutive part of the specific approach and explain how the larger theory of what needs to happen is put into practice (for example, street work), whereas techniques are tools subordinate to these specific methods (for example, direct, indirect, or passive outreach techniques) (Geißler & Hege, 2007). In this sense, it is not our aim to list all methods and techniques in practices of deradicalization. Rather we endeavor to fold our understanding of methods and techniques, in exemplum, into constructions of activity-oriented concepts or approaches.

For a systematization of these approaches, the interconnections of the following conceptual dimensions were analyzed:

Tab. 1 Dimensions of Analysis

Dimension	Definition	Example
A	Explicit or implicit <i>goal</i> of disengagement and/or deradicalization	“In the end, the primary objective, as I mentioned earlier, is to avert danger, from our point of view. This means that someone no longer commits crimes and the entire society is protected, so to speak” (Expert ⁵ Interview 6, 110)
B	Larger <i>concepts</i> named by the interviewees	“We work with the systemic approach” (Expert Interview 4, 64)
C	Larger <i>concepts</i> explicitly or implicitly <i>described</i> through practical experience	“We don’t want to create a new person. We want that to be coherent. And to erase everything there is, I think, is not the idea we have of an overall result” (Case Interview 9, 99)
D	<i>Methods</i> applied within an action plan or theory of what needs to happen to pursue deradicalization	“Depending on how the radicalized student behaves, we design our counseling sessions. Depending on what

⁵ Study A ‘Expert Interviews’; Study B ‘Case Interviews’. All citations from both studies were translated by the authors from German to English. The original text excerpts are available upon request.

	and/or disengagement	they report, we then adjust to it spontaneously, so to speak, and assess the situation and make recommendations as to what would be important in terms of deradicalization” (Expert Interview 10, 24)
E	<i>Techniques</i> applied within a described method	We use “genograms, sociograms, to make the family system understandable to those affected” (Expert Interview 15, 112)
F	<i>Contextual factors</i> explaining the practical relevance and use of a larger concept	“Experience shows that everything that is an office or an authority [...] causes fear. It creates pressure. [...] There is a fundamental mistrust and antipathy towards everything that is an authority, an office, and so on and so forth.” (Interview 9, 62)
G	<i>Other contents</i>	Open

Results

Overview of Approaches

Through the process of summarization and repeated abstraction, guiding statements on how the goal of deradicalization is pursued by the practitioners were deduced from the interviews:

1. The clients need to work towards an ideological reappraisal and thus ideological orientation should be reflected in counseling that takes religious aspects into account.
2. The clients’ resources and competencies as well as the social system in which they are placed must be strengthened. Thus, the clients’ social environment should be considered in a systemic manner within the remit of strengthening social, relational, and structurally contextual elements.

3. The clients need to experience acceptance and thus should be treated in a non-confrontational manner.
4. The clients need to learn to manage their lives and thus should be supported on a socio-economic, (self-)organizational, and psycho-social level.

Building on the condensed statements above, which are predominantly located within the parameters of A, B, and C (Tab. 1), the respected *approaches* are structured in a coherent manner and summarized in terms of multi-dimensional and content-related concepts, and draw on D, F and G (Tab. 1), that is, how deradicalization is pursued. Four approaches are derived from this, focusing on different objectives and hence influencing the choice of methods and corresponding techniques.

Tab. 2 Overview of approaches by orientation, objective, and mode of implementation

Orientation	Core Objectives	Implementation
<i>Religious-ideological</i>	Ideological reappraisal	Religious-ideological orientation in counseling; ideological/theological/religious discussions; confrontational/non-confrontational
<i>Acceptance</i>	Experience of acceptance	Non-confrontational and acceptance-oriented support in counseling
<i>Systemic</i>	Systemic stabilization	Strengthening social, relational, and structurally contextual factors in systemic counseling
<i>Life management</i>	Strengthening life management	Resilience-building through socio-economic and (self-)organizational support in counseling; Support in psycho-social wellbeing; Cooperation with other counseling centers; referral to psychotherapy and addiction therapy

Although these orientations or approaches represent different goals and strategies for action, they for the main part do not contradict one another, simply due to their often sharing parallel defined objectives. In many cases, the approaches listed as main categories are components of another overarching approach. For example, systemic orientation has strong cross-connections to all the approaches mentioned. However, the approaches related to the experience of acceptance and life management are, in part, contrary to an ideologically or religiously oriented course of action.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that the approaches in the field of action are not static constructs, but rather concepts that are influenced by contextual factors such as funding, employers, regional characteristics, professional backgrounds, and individual experiences. Counseling within the field of deradicalization is conducted mostly in multilingual teams of diverse profession, gender, and religious orientation. The professional background of the counselors is a particularly significant factor and, in part, indicates what the focus of the approach is. Indeed, there is a clear tendency for counselors with a background in Islamic studies and/or theology to take up ideological or religion-related topics in counseling. However, it remains unclear whether in multi-professional teams they may more often be assigned cases that have a greater need for discussion on corresponding topics.

One particularly significant distinguishing feature of programs of deradicalization is their institutional integration. Different civil societal and security agency perspectives bear upon the view of Islamist radicalization as a social problem. However, even though there are notable differences between civil societal and security institutions with regard to the formulation of overall goals and professional perspectives, the analysis shows a clear overlap in the ways they work with clients, in the form of a similar spread of applied concepts, methods, and techniques.

As a minority consensus in terms of cognitive and behavioral deradicalization, most counselors recognize a rejection of hostile Islamist-based attitudes and behaviors as the overriding goal of their work. The ways in which this goal is to be achieved are nevertheless very diverse and are presented under the following categories.

Religious-ideological orientation

While most of the approaches treat religious aspects of Islamist ideologies more as a sidenote to other, more fundamental factors of radicalization, a religious-ideological orientation is demonstrated by a strong focus on the very nature of the client's Islamist ideology, its dynamics, logics, and the individual reasons for a turning to it. In counseling, this is implemented through in-depth conversations and discussions about the client's mindset. Special attention is paid to issues such as homosexuality, gender roles and democratic values. In doing so, "ideological issues are clearly raised, then contrasted with the [values of the] free democratic basic order versus the Sharia, prohibitions, commandments, where do they get that from? And why are they convinced that this is the right thing to do?" (Expert Interview 22, 99).

Most experts choose non-confrontational conversation techniques and see it as vital "not to get lost in these kinds of Coran battles about who has the better evidence or proof that this or that is true or is not true" (Expert Interview 1a, 54). Yet, depending on the needs and the character of the client, some counselors choose rather confrontational means of engaging in conversations on topics such as "Sharia and democracy, are they compatible or not?" (Case Interview 6, 116). For example, by quoting

Verses and hadiths that support this [...]. Then he [referring to the client] brought back others, afterwards, he said that these discussions did him a lot of good. After one discussion after a few weeks he said, 'I had a headache because of you, because the contents did not please me, but it was good for me'. These were discussions in which we had the feeling that we were making slow, very slow, but nevertheless a bit of progress. The topics then came one after the other. He also had questions about gender roles, divinity, etc., and that came up at various meetings, but always in an appreciative and respectful manner in the discussion. (Case Interview 6, 116)

Methodologically, two of the Islamic theologians who were interviewed emphasize that giving the client an education on, for example, the diversity of Islamic theology along with a more critical historic interpretation of Quranic verses in today's context, can be a key means of initiating a positive process of reflection on the questions "What did I believe in?"

What do I currently believe in? What would I like to believe in?” (Expert Interview 8, 86). Through such means, counselors offer alternatives to extremist ideas, stressing the point that it is not a matter of contrasting ideologies and finding out which is better, but of recognizing the client’s need for spirituality and thereby opening a path to making it compatible with a socially acceptable life.

It is worth noting that according to the experts’ experiences, the individual function of religion, for better or worse, varies depending on the nature of as well as on the individual degree of the Islamist ideologization. The analysis suggests that only in a few cases is a profound examination of religion and in particular specific religious scripture called for. One expert explains that the majority of his clients have very little interest in religion. Due to a lack of theological interest among the clientele, in only “five percent of the cases [...] [he:she] has to intensively use [her:his] theological know-how” (Expert Interview 17, 28). One case explicitly illustrates how for many it is not necessarily a religious outlook that leads to Islamism. On the one hand, a client “wants to fight for justice at all costs” (Case Interview 7, 43); “He searched online for the right woman. With this question ‘Who wants to go to Syria with me?’” (Case Interview 7, 48). On the other hand, he “was once in a mosque, that is known as relevant [by the authorities as Islamist]. But that was all too strenuous for him, and he also said about praying: ‘That’s not really my thing, and so on’” (Case Interview 7, 56).

Notably, all of the interviewees who stress the importance of an ideological or theological approach have an academic background in Islamic studies or Islamic theology and/or are professed Muslims.

Orientations of Acceptance

One key observation was that advice and counseling programs apply, to varying degrees, acceptance-oriented approaches. Most of the interviewees mention acceptance-oriented approaches only in the sense of a low-threshold access to the counseling setting, especially within the initial contact phase. In addition, a more conceptualized approach of acceptance is cited by some experts as decisive in the process of counseling work. The cooperation between counselor and client is then “not a way of ‘I confront you with all that you have done’, but rather [...] deals with the client in an appreciative and accepting way” (Expert Interview 4, 78). The participants of the counseling should be able to enter into

counseling sessions on a long-term basis without any precondition. Unlike ideologically centered approaches, it is an attempt to

pick up people where their mindset is [...], so the only prerequisite is that you have to be up for this counseling process. [...] That doesn't mean jumping right in with such incredible theological debates, but rather getting to know each other bit by bit. (Expert Interview 5, 92)

This builds on the notion that problematic attitudes and behaviors should not be addressed at the beginning so that an appreciative relationship of trust can develop between counselors and clients:

If you have learned to appreciate the person sitting opposite you in some way, if you like what he says and how he is [...], then you are more likely to believe what he tells you about extremist attitudes, so to speak. (Expert Interview 1, 73)

One way to achieve this is by accepting substantively correct aspects of Islamist ideologies and acknowledging truths about “injustices against the Muslim world” (Expert Interview 1, 71). One common example is that there exists a great amount of social marginalization; “if you apply somewhere with a non-German name [...], you have fewer chances to get a job or to get an apartment” (Expert Interview 1, 71). Accordingly, this may help the clients to better understand how rather than being considered in any way foolish, their opinions and feelings are taken seriously. As one expert explains:

We often deal with people who have not been taken seriously, they have not been listened to properly. From their perspective, no one understands them, no one is interested in how they are actually doing, and no one is genuinely interested in getting to know them – this is first of all what we offer. (Expert Interview 15, 18)

The experts outline that this aspect is particularly important in online counseling settings because of the limited opportunities to develop relationships digitally. Acceptance-

oriented approaches are therefore emphasized for this area of work. Here, to strengthen and solidify communication “the most important thing is to value the opinion that is being expressed and not this condescending ‘but your opinion isn’t worth anything, it’s wrong what you’re saying’” (Expert Interview 6, 70).

The acceptance-oriented approach is also more generally shaped by the concrete goals of the counseling practices, instituting the renunciation of violence and crime as an overriding objective of disengagement and deradicalization, beyond which there is “no positive template of the model citizen” (Expert Interview 23, 73). Therefore, orientation towards acceptance also means that “we don’t want to create a new person. We want that to be coherent. And to erase everything there is, I think, is not the idea we have of an overall result” (Case Interview 9, 99).

Systemic Orientation

Systemic-oriented approaches focus on the social and relational contextual factors of the client’s (de)radicalization. Building on the notion that the social environment must be considered and/or set up for sustainable prevention, disengagement and deradicalization, systemic-oriented approaches integrate the clients’ social environment into counseling work. Here, the main focus is put on the basic needs, challenges, and resources of the clients, leading to a (self-)development of strategies to solve the problem of Islamist radicalization.

As the analysis indicates, systemically-oriented approaches become particularly relevant when direct access to clients proves to be difficult. In some cases, those primarily affected are not consulted at all. One interviewee points out that in these cases, counselors attribute high-impact expectations to the social environment; “ideally, people do not even realize that they are being deradicalized via the social system” (Expert Interview 15, 72).

Depending on the case and the counselor, however, the main strategy is outlined as a direct exchange with the client to strengthen them in their social system. In one particular case, a counselor notices a lack of self-confidence in dealing with their social relations and environment. The “fact that he/she adapted very strongly” (Case Interview 9, 82) is particularly problematized, leading the counselor towards the notion that in this case, the systematically oriented “goal is to get someone to think, to reflect and to think for themselves, too” (Case Interview 9, 82), so that the client learns to independently “formulate his/her own

goals and also learns to control the implementation, which attitude towards life he/she wants to have” (Case Interview 9, 82).

What emerges most frequently in the interviews is a systemic, but nevertheless client-centered means of working that progressively involves the client as well as relevant actors in the individual’s social environment. A case is expatiated upon in which the counselors initially had difficulties gaining the client’s trust during the implementation of this approach. Considering that they “had a difficult past, a lot of difficult family circumstances” (Case Interview 7, 109), they examined their social contacts, focusing on the question of whether there is “somehow a role model or [how we] can [...] activate somebody with a role model function” (Case Interview 7, 109). As a result, the counselors found out about a sports coach who was a person of respect and trust for the client and who agreed to get involved in the process. According to the counselors, showing authentic interest in the client’s hobbies and having the coach vouch for them was essential in establishing trust.

We once participated in a training session. I think that was the key, for him/her to realize ‘Ah okay, they are really interested in me, they don’t just want to sit and talk, they are really interested in my life’. From then on, he/she came voluntarily, and the coach no longer needed to be there. (Case Interview 7, 114)

Overall, three main areas of focus for systemically informed counseling emerge: the nuclear family, friends and partners, and institutions.

Nuclear Family: As the experts working in a systemic manner note, positive developments can often only be set in motion once the nuclear family has changed its behaviors and adopted an accepting attitude towards the client as a person. However, this requires that family crises and emotionally charged issues are addressed and managed. Therefore, special attention is given to figures of attachment, primarily within the family. The counselors “look at how the communication with parents is going: ‘How can we intervene? How can you also support them?’” (Expert Interview 5, 75). Subsequently, family caregivers are consulted on how to take on key supportive and concordantly sanctioning roles. For example, in the case of returning foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq, the importance of parents is particularly emphasized, often as the last points of contact and social orientation in

Germany. It becomes more complicated if clients have “been severely traumatized by their parents. Then it is not necessarily easy to find a solution” (Expert Interview 14, 51) or when the family itself is rooted in an Islamist milieu.

Friends and Partners: At the level of relationships, friendships and partnerships are also of high significance. Due to their in-depth knowledge of the living situation and interests of the person concerned, friends and partners are an important source of information outside the Islamist network of which the individual is a part, and often provide starting points for efforts of social stabilization. Here, the high value of social acceptance, solidarity, and participation is emphasized by the practitioners. It is interesting to note that though their role is emphasized on an abstract level, there is a lack of concrete examples in which partners and friends are addressed directly in counseling. This demonstrates the importance of the role of institutional apparatuses, especially schools, through which friendships and contact with peers can be encouraged.

Institutions: Much of the socialization of young people takes place at an institutional level, mostly in schools. According to the interviewees, schools are especially influential places, not only because of their educational objectives but also because they provide an opportunity to interact with peers of different religions, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Other important agents of socialization include vocational training systems, public-sector and voluntary youth welfare organizations, or other voluntary associations such as are found in organized sports. The systemic approach assigns a key position to the respective actors and their professional competencies within these institutions in order to counter tendencies towards radicalization as early and comprehensively as possible. Through the counseling work professionals become sensitive to their own impact on an individual level, as well as representatives of their institutions. This is especially important in the case of actors from government agencies: “Experience shows that everything that is an office or an authority [...] causes fear. It creates pressure. [...] There is a fundamental mistrust and antipathy towards everything that is an authority, an office, and so on and so forth.” (Expert Interview 9, 62).

Given the many positive short-, medium- and long-term potentials for the social stabilizing of clients in schools and the vocational training system, the experts are critical of the institutional structures and the associated actors’ attempts to deal with Islamist

radicalization. Several interviewees state that schools and apprenticeship employers do not take an adequate amount of responsibility: “So it’s often the case that when schools or employers notice that there’s someone extremist in their school, in their company, then they want to get rid of this problem. And that’s where I think some institutions don’t live up to their social responsibility” (Expert Interview 1a, 87).

Although the majority of interviewed experts state that they work in a systemic or systemic-oriented manner, not all specify the approach in terms of a concrete methodology. In a cross-section it is apparent that what we refer to in the next segment as approaches oriented towards life management is an integral part of systemically oriented counseling, focusing on socio-economic factors, self-organization, as well as a psycho-social stabilization. The interviewees mostly define their systemic implementation of the goals through the application of “systemic questioning techniques” (Expert Interview 15, 53) that induce a “change of perspective” (Expert Interview 3, 72) or through vaguely described forms of “counseling reference persons and relevant institutions” (Expert Interview 12, 64). More precisely, some experts utilize specific techniques of systemic counseling like “genograms, sociograms, to make the family system understandable to those affected” (Expert Interview 15, 112). One common technique visualizing processes of family mapping; in Germany in particular the use of the so-called *Systembrett*, a wooden board on which small figures and symbols are placed to represent different systems and/or processes, is prevalent. In fewer cases, systemic “constellation sessions” (Expert Interview 1a, 97) are held with participants in person. Overall, there is no clear system by which everyone abides, but instead a diverse set of very loosely standardized techniques and methods.

Orientations towards Life Management

Various ways of helping the client cope with everyday life were described in the interviews, predominantly conceptualized as means of life management, focusing on socioeconomic factors, self-organization, as well as a psycho-social stabilization.

Socio-economic stabilization includes dealing with authorities and/or creating a secure financial situation. The counselors usually start by finding out whether the client is “burdened by debts: ‘Is he even capable to meet various administrative requirements, to file applications to secure an income?’” (Expert Interview 22, 4). Approaching deradicalization and

disengagement pragmatically, the counselors try to discover and untangle “dependencies [that] have arisen in the course of one’s biography, such as material dependencies. We also know that some members of the [Islamist] scene give loans to their brothers and sisters, and then they are pragmatically caught up in it” (Expert Interview 15, 106). Many counselors in these cases hand their clients over to debt counseling.

Depending on the individual needs and resources “the clients are accompanied in coping with life, i.e., going to the employment office or finding a job” (Expert Interview 19, 80): “You look over an application. You accompany him to a job interview. You take him to the social welfare office. You go to the residents’ registration office” (Expert Interview 23, 49). In addition to factors related to income and employment, bad credit often contributes to the major challenge of finding adequate housing:

In the area of housing, we have to deal a lot with people who have entries in ‘Schufa’ [German General Credit Protection Agency that provides information about creditworthiness]. That can be a handicap [...] to get an apartment in the first place and how do I present myself to the housing association? The struggle for housing is relatively high and if I’m already Muslim, and I also have a criminal record or I have a ‘Schufa’, that’s not to my advantage. In all these areas that I have just mentioned, we offer accompanying support. (Expert Interview 8, 88)

If the clients have children, “then you talk to the youth welfare office, so they can offer help in raising them. Or you help to look for a spot in a daycare center” (Expert Interview 23, 49). In the case of criminal proceedings or restrictive measures against the client, the counselors may “speak with lawyers, to police, to probation officers” (Expert Interview 23, 49) and explain the need for basic stabilization in society in an effort to avoid jeopardizing their stability.

While some interviewees predominantly use the approaches oriented towards life management as an intermediate step in establishing trust, keeping in touch, and engaging in conversation, others emphasize the purpose of life management in and of itself. Some do not even see a necessity in entering into a process of ideological distancing guided by counseling.

As soon as that works out [...], a living place, social contacts, hobbies this and that. And as soon as that has been established, we then slowly try to withdraw as counselors. [...] We don't close the case, but we withdraw, because we then say 'You can handle it on your own. You are independent, you are self-reliant, you don't need us'. (Expert Interview 17, 87)

As there is "no positive template of the model citizen" (Expert Interview 23, 73), "you can never say this person is completely deradicalized" (Expert Interview 24, 69). Thus, one interviewee states that counseling should move away from such ideals: "That's what I keep saying, actually literally, 'I'm not a babysitter for people who potentially at some point [...] may commit a violent crime ten years from now'" (Expert Interview 5, 96).

Self-organization is centralized as an important medium- and long-term objective of life management. This builds on the notion that deradicalization should not only focus on problematic mindsets and behavioral goals dictated by particular societal standards. In the long run, clients need to learn to manage situations of crisis on their own or at least to understand how to get appropriate support.

The clients should not be educated to be dependent on our help [...] This means that I don't just hand people their jobs and apartments on a silver platter and all they have to do is take them. Instead, I try to understand what I can expect from them, what is it that actually overwhelms and overburdens them at the moment, and help with these challenges. (Expert Interview 8, 88)

For this reason, "it is the main objective to create realistic perspectives and not just any perspectives, but realistic first steps towards a stable future" (Expert Interview 19, 71). Psycho-social stabilization, in many cases by referral to therapeutic treatment, is an important feature of approaches based around life managements, not least in order to tackle the stress and strain that can be caused by rigid Islamist behavioral norms, leading to

a kind of overburdening through ideology. You can no longer maintain social contacts to which you may still be attached, but which you also give up under pressure from the

new environment. You can no longer pursue any activities, no sports, no music, no cinema. You have to give up things that may have meant something to you before, if you played an instrument or had a pet or whatever. (Expert Interview 23, 41)

However, devotion to an Islamist ideology is often described as “just the symptom of the real problem, the psycho-social deficits that cry out for compensation” (Expert Interview 1a, 77). To serve the processing of events during an individual’s radicalization and to reckon with why they took place it is important to understand “feelings, relationship patterns, dependencies” (Expert Interview 15, 106). This appears to be particularly helpful for young people who have not yet been able to come to terms with the lasting negative effects of certain biographical events.

For such reasons some practitioners employ methods and techniques of biographically related work and trauma pedagogy. For instance, to understand an egregious psycho-social factor, in this case, drug addiction, one counselor elaborates upon how biography work helped to clarify the connections between Islamist ideology and addiction, as

he/she [the client] clearly said, ‘Islam helps me to be a good person, to not take drugs anymore, not to drink alcohol anymore’ [...] the father is addicted to alcohol and beats him all the time [...], this is a development, he needs [...] someone to say ‘alcohol is haram’, this is what he needed. (Case Interview 7, 21)

Another expert describes how their counseling work is sometimes directed at tackling drug addiction in terms of psycho-social stabilization. “Some are addicted to drugs; some have other addictions. We also try, if they have a dependency, an addiction, then we try to find out how [...] we [can] deal with this problem” (Expert Interview 2, 20).

Others distance themselves and their vocational objectives from any distinctly psycho-socially oriented method but instead try to place their clients in psychological care. “The first thing we tried to do was to involve him/her in psychological therapy, or at least to accompany them psychologically.” (Case Interview 8, 97). The analysis highlights that mental illnesses can negatively impact deradicalization practices in such a way that the clients are “then simply not accessible for certain conversation offers and a treatment of the disease [...] shifts

into the foreground” (Expert Interview 8, 82). In this instance, referral to and cooperation with therapists is also established. In some cases, clients are supported in attending support groups:

We also had people, or one of them, who had mentally ill parents, so it was very difficult for him to deal with that. And that had nothing to do with radicalization per se or with ideology. And then we went with him to a self-help group and talked to others who had somehow experienced the same thing, and then he was able to be supported a bit. (Expert Interview 12, 44)

Mental illness in the family is a recurring pattern in the interviews, and considerations of family history are often described as particularly helpful. “First of all his/her sibling was known for mental illness, he/she also had very severe psychoses, and now this has also occurred with him” (Case Interview 5, 9). In these cases, psychologists or support groups can also be involved to provide “psycho-education: ‘What is happening to his mother?’ She was so important to him. ‘How can he be supported in this issue?’” (Case Interview 7, 90). One counselor, referring to a client who dropped out of the counseling process, notes that

We actually suspect that psychological help is more appropriate. We do not have the right profession for this, but of course, we always pass that on as feedback. [...] I have googled quite a lot about what disorder this could be, if you ask what development he/she has made. (Case Interview 6, 148)

In this example, the limitations of counseling as it relates to the challenges of mental health are highlighted by the putative unwillingness of clients to reach out for concordant psychological help.

Limitations

In both studies the process of coding and interpreting the meanings in the text was put to a pretest, in which discrepancies and inconsistencies were discussed and cross checked on the basis of text passages highlighted by the coders. In the follow up, this tightly-knit reflective

procedure was repeated on random samples and crucial passages were marked with memos by the coders. However, with several people forming categories based on the same material, a complete and perfect agreement cannot be claimed (Kuckartz, 2016). A weakness concerning intercoder reliability is that numerical measurements were not applied such as, say, by determination of a coefficient giving detailed information on the discrepancies in coding. The translation from German into English was done after the analysis, which limits the risk of changes in content due to translation. Nevertheless, slight distortions of language-specific semantic and interpretive values cannot be ruled out.

Another significant limitation of the study lies in the expertise of the interviewees. Distinct conclusions on which effects the modes of action/approaches have on the clients cannot be drawn; the results only contain self-descriptive information. Hence, the interviewees' expertise lies predominantly in their own interpretative and experiential knowledge, giving insights into their means of operating within the field of action, but they are not necessarily qualified experts in their field of activity. In some cases, it may be argued that this is demonstrated by accounts that show missing links between the use of methods and larger concepts of action, for example, by the statements of counselors who claim to work in a systemic manner or to want to do so, but who lack specialized training. This lack of specialized training, which is noticeable across professions, bespeaks a "particularly worrying aspect [...] that the demand for specialized personnel has likely outpaced the available pool of experienced practitioners" (Koehler & Fiebig, 2019, p. 47). Without extensive training in deradicalization practices, it is also worth raising the question to what extent academic credentials determine the orientation of the practical work, given that interviewees with a background in Islamic studies or Islamic theology tend to conduct ideology-oriented discussions with reference to the religion of Islam. Conversely, it is questionable whether some social workers simply avoid venturing into these topics because they lack in-depth knowledge in this regard. While on the one hand these aspects may be interpreted as signs for a need of professionalization, Baaken et al. (2020, p. 11) on the other hand argue – on the basis of an interview study with practitioners – that the different backgrounds of the counselors should be seen rather as "opportunities and not necessarily as signs of deficient standards or quality control". Further to this, due to the structure and systematics of the analysis, the opportunity to include a category which could critically be called "conceptually

and methodologically uninformed practices” was demurred. An analysis of “what is not there” may provide an impetus for further reflection regarding concepts and standards of deradicalization practices in the as yet unregulated field of action.

It is also worth noting that with regard to the composition of the sample, not all professions active in the field of deradicalization are represented in study A and B. This can be explained by the selection process of the interviewees which was designed to gather a diverse sample of projects but not to necessarily represent all possible professions active therein. For this reason, no psychologists were interviewed, which, when considered in conjunction with Waleciak (2021), may have led to a less clear presentation of what he describes as a psycho-social approach in counseling. This crucial omission reflects the practical realities of counseling practices, in which civil society projects intending to focus on psychosocial factors in particular have difficulties in acquiring qualified personnel and retaining them in the long term due to issues in financing (Bösing et al., 2023).

Discussion

In the cross-section we identified four approaches to deradicalization based on the practitioners’ conceptualizations and experiences of how deradicalization works. Since the respective goals and strategies for action are mostly concurrent and the larger concepts often cannot be completely separated from one another, the approaches are understood as *orientations* aligning core objectives and means of implementation. Here we determined that the imperatives of action are religiously and ideologically oriented, oriented towards acceptance, systemically oriented, and oriented towards life management in counselling towards deradicalization. These approaches largely involve collaborations with other support systems and institutions to meet the individual needs of the clients. Although our methodology resembles that of Waleciak (2021), we come to a different conclusion. Our analysis shows clear references to a larger concept of orientations towards acceptance. Psycho-social approaches are omitted in comparison to Waleciak (2021), as these are subsumed into the larger concept of life management. This may be due to the composition (see limitations section) or the different size of the sample. Also, it is possible that within the interpretative, analytical procedure, different weighting of categories of larger concepts and

methods occurred. For example, in our study an accumulated use of content-related methods itself did not necessarily lead to the formation of a coherent approach guided by a larger concept. Thusly, to take a few examples, “biography work”, “drug counseling”, and specific interview techniques such as “active listening” (Waleciak, 2021, p. 125) do not stand for a psycho-social approach in accumulation. Even though these and other methods with a psycho-social impact on clients are recurring, they are mostly mentioned following the larger idea that the clients need to manage their lives and thus should be supported on a socio-economic, (self-)organizational, and psycho-social level – therefore they were categorized accordingly. Moreover, it is questionable why Waleciak (2021) combines counseling, therapeutic, and psychiatric measures in one approach, since they are distinct practices in terms of the scope, implementation, and professional understanding in casework.

On a programmatic level Koehler (2016, p. 118) stresses, “strictly speaking, only those programs including the ideological change or psychological disengagement can be called a ‘deradicalization’ program”. It is therefore not surprising that almost all the deradicalization practitioners expressed ideological reappraisal as the conceptual bedrock of their deradicalization practices. Waleciak (2021) describes ideological approaches, centered on in-depth conversations and discussions about the client’s mindset, as by definition the core element of deradicalization work, directly aiming at the reappraisal of extremist convictions. However, as his and our findings indicate, this does not mean that ideological work necessarily constitutes a quantitatively major part of actual deradicalization practices, which corresponds with the common categorization of *push* and *pull* factors, in which ideological elements are described as *a* potential but not *the* reason to engage, disengage, radicalize, and deradicalize (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Altier et al., 2017). A cross-section of the approaches shows that depending on individual needs and timing, conversations about ideology or religion may be held. However, they are in many cases regarded as a subordinate step and not decisive for the success of counseling. Only the religious-ideological oriented approaches are centered on ideological reappraisal through conversation, drawing on religion and theology as a resource, assigning Islam itself a pivotal role in the preventive logic of action.

Langner (2020) asserts that a reference to Islam or to being a Muslim is a common strategy of preventive projects to establish relations with the clients and to work towards the deconstruction of ideological narratives. However, there are certain risks: ideological debates

may pose threats to processes of disengagement and deradicalization. Building on theories and empirical findings within the field of social psychology, Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013, p. 107) remarks, that “unless an external influence agent hits on a spot, where the potential exiter is doubting or wavering, chances are that even the most well-argued, logical, and cogent message, will be counterargued and rejected”. An ideologically persuasive intention, as well as such intentions manifested in the form of non-confrontational talks, may trigger resistance mechanisms and potentially risks a *boomerang effect* strengthening the clients’ Islamist attitudes (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013). In shaping counter-narratives to extremist ideologies, also Braddock (2014) urges to take the risks of psychological reactance into account.

Acceptance-oriented approaches try to circumvent the risks of boomerang effects and reactance, especially in the initial contact phase, by obviating any major resistance to radicalized individuals and ideologies in counseling sessions. This strategy draws on experience from social work and counseling practices, indicating that especially at the beginning of counseling, threats to individual freedom can lead to reactance, as those affected may try to restore their freedom. Accordingly, clients could insist on the diversity of problem definitions or resist any offers of help (Widulle, 2012; Steindl et al., 2015). Greuel and König (2016) point out that appraisals of the political education of adolescents with an affinity for right-wing ideologies has shown that lecturing and moralizing attitudes toward those clients could hinder successful educational processes. Following up on Scherr (2003), they note that a practice directly aimed at combating and changing attitudes is perceived as threatening and is likely to provoke defensive reactions, stressing that “pedagogy aiming at (moral) instruction and conversion” (Greuel & König, 2016, p. 83; AT) will probably fail and that the experience of acceptance and recognition proves to be more effective.

Counterpoints to the orientation of confrontational pedagogy, which recurs proportionately in the ideological approaches, and acceptance-oriented approaches have been critically discussed for a long time concerning the phenomenon of right-wing extremism (Krafeld, 1996; Weidner & Kilb, 2004). Pedagogic orientations are distinguished by the guiding principles of a more deficit-oriented confrontational work and a more resource-oriented accepting work (Krafeld, 2009). According to Krafeld (2009), confrontational pedagogy carries the risk that the manifestation of a deficit-oriented perspective through devaluation and a denial of respect cannot be prevented. Acceptance, on the other hand, shifts

the focus away from deficient political or religious orientations and is rather a means of showing interest in the person and becoming acquainted with each other –this does not and should not mean, however, that problematic views and actions have to be approved or supported. For the prevention of the Salafi radicalization of adolescents, Toprak and Weitzel (2017) argue that a confrontational orientation should be understood as a last resort in instances where accepting and encouraging interventions have failed to show positive effects. Herein the “confrontational method cannot claim to be a panacea against the offerings of Salafi groups” (Toprak & Weitzel, 2017, p. 195; AT). With regard to the desired deradicalization, they rather provide “access to the argumentation and argumentation logic” of the addressees (Toprak & Weitzel, 2017, p. 195; AT). Contrasting the modes of operation oriented towards acceptance and ideology, it is questionable under which concessions ideologically grounded approaches should be applied. The concern about reactance or boomerang effects are apparent; likewise, the counselors view direct, rather confrontational ideology-oriented approaches critically. Indeed, even non-confrontational ideology work is seen as a ‘should’ but not a ‘must’ that has to be pushed in counseling. Furthermore, it appears that a strong orientation towards ideology, whether confrontative or non-confrontative, runs the risk of focusing mainly on deficits, merely replacing one normative construct with another.

Systemic-oriented approaches regard clients within the conditions of their respective surrounding social systems, focusing on the interaction of context factors relating to the life situation. Problematic situations are thus explicitly understood and attempted to be solved within their micro-, meso- and macrostructural contexts (Schubert, 2022). Dittmar (2023) names six principles in systemic counseling towards deradicalization that are characterized by:

- a contextualized view of the problem within a holistic counseling approach
- an understanding of the defined problem as a social construction of reality;
- a consideration of the dynamics and complexity of social systems as well as their self-organizational compositions;
- an orientation in counseling with regard to resources inherent to the system;
- the promotion of cooperation between system members;

- the appreciation of all system members.

Not all experts provide insights into a systemic approach guided by such differentiated understanding. However, many of the interviewees have similar fundamental attitudes toward their work with clients. What stands out is the attempt to achieve a holistic understanding of the individual cases, taking all relevant stakeholders into account. Additionally, our observations agree to a large extent with those of El-Mafaalani et al. (2016), describing systemic practices in the field as holistic approaches covering the affective, the pragmatic, and the ideological. Waleciak (2021, p. 130; AT) highlights the “stabilization of social relationships [...] [as] the central regulatory element of systemic approaches”; our findings partially agree with this observation. Nevertheless, in some cases the existing social bonds are evaluated as positive and the focus of the systemic approach portrayed in the interviews may shift to pragmatic elements of life management or psycho-social factors.

Methods and techniques applied in systemic counseling, such as genograms and family maps are usually not regarded as hard diagnostic tools (von Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2019); in counseling they are mostly used to understand personal history and family ties, potentially providing impulse for lively discussions and conversations (von Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2019; Dittmar, 2023). Concerning the application of systemic questioning techniques, which aim to stimulate (self-)reflection and encourage respective discussions and conversations, it seems that there is still a clear need for professionalization. While a systemic assessment of the cases is well established and some methods and techniques from systemic counseling are applied, the accounts of casework show that the application of methods is rarely coherently linked to questioning techniques recognized within the field of systemic counseling, such as circular questioning (*zirkuläre Fragen*) (Beilfuß, 2018). This may be due to the fact that only a minority of the counselors have advanced training in systemic counseling. Overall, this leads us to the conclusion that a systemic orientation in counseling is common practice but should not be confused with a coherent, methodologically sound concept of systemic counseling, guided by distinct principles which in Germany is recognized and specified by associations such as the German Association for Systemic Therapy (DGSF) or the Systemic Society (SG).

Mental illnesses are discussed in scientific and professional debates on (de)radicalization processes, especially concerning the assessment of violent extremists. However, international systematic reviews conclude that psychiatric disorders are not widespread among radicalized young people. Clear links between mental disorders and radicalization processes have not yet been demonstrated. Nevertheless, findings indicate that crisis events are relevant risk factors in extremists' biographies. Consequently, mental disorders can exacerbate vulnerabilities and constitute risk factors of radicalization (Campelo et al., 2018; Misiak et al., 2019). As for deradicalization, Bjørgo (2009; 2011) points out that not only does the extremist lifestyle cause stress and psychological strain through its own rigid norms and behavioral guidelines, but also "being the prey hunted by police, military and intelligence forces may be extremely stressful and exhausting in the long run" (Bjørgo, 2011, p. 284). Particularly in case of a membership in extremist or terrorist organizations, this may lead to a *burnout* and in ending intense commitment (Bjørgo, 2009; Disley, 2011). There are also diverse drivers of disillusionment with regard to the specific group, its ideology and individual function, giving impetus to a withdrawal from an ideology and/or group (Disley, 2011). The findings of study A and B show that dealing with mentally ill clients can be a major challenge, especially when counselors are confronted with the question of whether mental illness or radicalization are the dominant problem. Often, referral to therapeutic services is considered or deemed necessary, yet uncertainties prevail regarding the course of action when mental illness becomes a primary concern. Allroggen (2020) emphasizes that especially in cases of clear resistance to the counseling process, a checkup for mental illness should be embarked upon. In his view, the counseling process should be interrupted in the case of severe disorders so that therapeutic help can be sought first. To this end, the expansion of psychotherapeutic services for young people with radicalization tendencies is a necessity, in order to establish low-threshold access for the target group. Rau et al. (2020) remark in this context that at the same time, psychotherapists need to be supported in order to gain confidence in dealing with young people that demonstrate tendencies towards radicalization.

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