The Working Alliance in Practice: Navigating Effective Engagement with Violent Extremist Offenders

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Abstract

Establishing trust and building a strong Working Alliance are crucial challenges when working with violent extremist offenders (VEOs). Extensive literature highlights the significance of these elements for effective interventions with this group. However, research has not yet approached the specific steps involved in creating a Working Alliance. This article fills this gap by drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with eight professionals from six European jurisdictions. The article also contrasts insights from practical work with academic state of the art. By offering these insights, the article aims to facilitate the creation of effective Working Alliances and contribute to the academic debates on the disengagement of VEOs.

Introduction

More and more recent evaluations and systematic reviews suggest that many interventions with violent extremist offenders are effective in terms of disengagement and/or deradicalization (El-Said, 2015; Grip and Kotajoki, 2019; Hansen & Lid, 2020; Koehler, 2017; Koller, 2019; Morrison et al, 2021; Neumann, 2010; Silke & Veldhuis, 2017; Weber et al, 2017; Zeuthen, 2021). As such, a number of methods were mentioned as essential in achieving this objective. In spite of the wide variety of programs and interventions developed around the world, trust building and the quality of the Working Alliance with violent extremist offenders[2] (VEOs) were almost constantly mentioned in relation to the successful interventions. This observation seems to be critical in the context of deradicalization and/or disengagement interventions where a strong Working Alliance supports the professionals in addressing key issues such as 'us and them' thinking, model critical thinking, dynamic

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[2] By violent extremist we mean '*Someone who promotes, supports, facilitates or commits acts of violence to achieve ideological, religious, political goals or social change. In some cases, a violent extremist prisoner may not be in prison for an offence (or alleged offence) related to violent extremism, but nonetheless has been assessed as being a violent extremist according to the definition set out above.*' (UNODC, p.143)

security and promote tolerance (Dean, 2016; Hassan et al, 2021; Horgan, 2009; Silke and Veldhuis, 2017). These targets of intervention are essential for addressing attitudes, thinking and behavior that are significant for any deradicalization and/or disengagement interventions (Horgan, 2009; Horgan & Braddock, 2010). Additionally, recent research by Koehler et al. (2023) emphasizes the importance of factual accuracy within deradicalization counseling approaches. They argue that the effectiveness of these interventions is significantly influenced by the counselor's ability to present factual and accurate information, which helps in maintaining credibility and trust within the counseling relationship. This factor is particularly crucial when addressing the deeply ingrained beliefs held by violent extremist offenders (VEOs), where any perceived inaccuracies might reinforce existing radical ideologies instead of challenging them.

Professionals working on deradicalization and/or disengagement around the world belong usually to many disciplines – such as social work, psychology, law etc. Depending on their traditions or legislation, they are psychologists, social workers, probation officers, specialized exit workers, deradicalization workers and so on. For the purpose of this paper, we opted for more context-neutral terms such as 'professional' or 'practitioner'. Both terms can be understood in most of the global jurisdictions and suggest trained staff that work with violent extremist offenders. As most of the European programs generally aim at disengagement[3], this paper will look at the Working Alliance from this perspective.

The importance of the Working Alliance

The disengagement literature generally refers to rapport building as the foundation of any effective intervention (Dean, 2016; Horgan, 2009) by using active listening, empathy and non-judgmental attitudes. In fact, it has been argued that failing to develop a good Working Alliance with VEOs may lead to anger, resistance and 'slow or even halt the progression towards the treatment goals' (Cherney et al, 2021:19; see also Manchak et al, 2014; Skeem et al, 2007).

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[3] *EUTEx Insight No. 3 Practices in disengagement and deradicalization programmes of terrorist and extremist offenders in the EU and beyond.* (2023).
https://www.eutex.eu/_files/ugd/ff9c7a_f84d84b0f560467baab9197ce44c3504.pdf?index=true.

The literature has furthermore emphasized a number of essential components of the Working Alliance work, such as for example 'winning' the client's trust (Dean, 2012; Cherney, 2020). In this context, studies emphasize the significance of consistent, reliable and transparent communication while demonstrating competence, respect and commitment to confidentiality (Durnescu, 2020). Cultural sensitivity has also emerged as an important consideration when working with VEOs from diverse backgrounds (Dean, 2012; Williams, 2017). Concretely, professionals should consider the unique cultural, religious, and ideological factors influencing the individual's worldview and tailor interventions accordingly. This is because individualized approaches appear to promote trust and addresses specific needs while enhancing the Working Alliance. The literature has also emphasized the value of collaborative goal-setting and shared decision-making (Lauland et al, 2019) in developing the Working Alliance. Encouraging active participation, soliciting feedback, and involving VEOs in designing their own rehabilitation plans seem to contribute to higher motivation for change. Addressing resistance and ambivalence among VEOs is another important aspect of building the Working Alliance (Cherney et al, 2021). Koehler, Cherney, and Templar (2023) further contribute to this discussion by highlighting that the accuracy of the information shared by professionals plays a critical role in establishing and maintaining this trust. They suggest that any misinformation, whether intentional or accidental, can severely undermine the Working Alliance by leading to resistance or disengagement from the process. Therefore, ensuring factual accuracy is as crucial as other rapport-building techniques like empathy and active listening. Acknowledging and exploring these feelings in a non-confrontational manner while maintaining a respectful stance can help build trust and address barriers to the Working Alliance. Finally, flexibility and consistent support from professionals are crucial in building and maintaining the Working Alliance (Dean, 2014; 2016). This includes usually regular communication, ongoing assessments, and providing continuous support even in the face of setbacks or relapses.

The literature thus highlights the importance of the Working Alliance by building up trust, establishing rapport, employing culturally sensitive and individualized approaches, fostering collaboration and addressing resistance. However, concrete and specific guidelines for achieving these objectives are missing until now. This is the gap that this article aims to close: to provide professionals with concrete examples and strategies on how some of these

objectives can be achieved in real life situations. In doing so, the paper will briefly present the methodology employed in the study, its main findings and the conclusions. The section on findings follows a chronological logic, presenting what the participants in the study described as important strategies for before the first meeting, during the first meeting and when to move to the next stage. Do's and Don'ts are also presented in the paper as they are critical in building up the Working Alliance and reducing the barriers in communication.

Data and methods

The present study was conducted in early 2020 and involved a sample of eight front-line practitioners who specialize in working with violent extremist offenders, particularly in closed institutions i.e. prisons. The participants were selected using a snowball sampling method, whereby initial participants recommended other potential subjects for the interview. The recruitment process was facilitated by two prominent European practitioner networks, namely the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) and the Confederation of European Probation (CEP).

The participants in this study represent prison departments in the United States, France, Spain, Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands. While most of them primarily work with jihadist offenders, two participants also have experience working with right-wing extremist offenders. Their ages range from 35 to 48, with two women and six men included in the sample. All participants possess extensive experience in the field, with professional backgrounds in social work or psychology, and their collective years of experience range from five to 20 years. Notably, three participants have worked with over 200 VEOs throughout their careers. It is worth mentioning that two participants have personal prior experience with radicalized networks, which lends them a unique perspective and expertise in their work (referred to as 'professional ex' in this context).

While the sample size may appear relatively small, it is important to consider the inherent secrecy surrounding this subject matter and the limited number of practitioners engaged in this specialized line of work. Within certain jurisdictions, only a few practitioners are involved in addressing the needs of this distinct group of offenders (e.g. Catalonia,

Netherlands). Hence, the sample size of eight participants can be considered significant for an exploratory study within this context.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data for this study, with each interview lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted online, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis techniques (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Except for one instance, all interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. The exception occurred when two practitioners were interviewed together, as this reflects their collaborative approach when working with VEOs in the Netherlands. Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with information about the study's objectives and purpose. They were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and given the option to withdraw from the study at any point in time.

Results

Features of the Working Alliance with VEOs in practice

This section examines critical aspects identified by practitioners working with violent extremist offenders that have implications for effective engagement and rehabilitation efforts. The insights gained shed light on the need for standards, attitudes and values, language usage, and the establishment of a safe and secure environment conducive to positive learning experiences.

The first observation, evident from the outset of the analysis, was that each professional performs differently from the others in terms of the general approach of the clients and skills used. This lack of standards or agreed good practices was also mentioned by one participant as a huge deficiency:

> *"I do feel what you do is important, first of all, there's no clear methodology*
> *for working with violent extremism right now. We feel lonely here in the US,*
> *there aren't a lot of us here, there is no standard of practice, there are no*
> *standard assessments, there is nobody who helps govern the space ..."*
> (Respondent 6)

Although each of the participants had undertaken different forms of training or education, it seems that each jurisdiction takes its own approach in dealing with VEOs at the micro level. No European or international methodology or guidelines were mentioned during the interviews. This may be explained by the fact that most of these documents focus on macro- or meso-level interventions without going deeply into the details of day-to-day practice (see for example The RAN Rehabilitation Manual, 2020).

Another important preliminary observation is that the work with VEOs begins long before the practitioner meets the client. Some of the participants cited important pre-requisites that the practitioners should master prior to engaging with this group. Acceptance, empathy and a non-judgmental approach were mentioned as important values for someone who hopes to work with VEOs. Self-awareness was also mentioned as an important characteristic practitioners need to possess. By 'self-awareness' the participants seem to understand a deep sense of why they are there, what their role is, and how they should treat the clients.

Self-awareness can help the practitioner understand what is meant beyond the spoken words (Respondent 5). To use an example given by one participant, in a situation where a client is lying, the first instinctive reaction is to feel offended and confrontative. On the contrary, a self-aware professional would understand that 'there is not enough of a relationship' yet and more should be done to create an authentic channel of communication. Linked to self-awareness is self-confidence. According to some of the participants, a good practitioner should look self-confident and 'put together' in order to inspire trust in clients (see also Rex, 1999 for dealing with generic offenders).

Even the language used by the practitioners seems to be important. As one reported:

> *"... if we continue to label them as terrorists as if they are separate from the rest of humanity then they will never be really re-embraced back in the folds of society, so, in some ways we may be creating some barriers for ourselves by how we separate them as a special class of clients, which has been done before." (*Participant 7*)*

Therefore, the terms the practitioners use to describe their target group – clients, beneficiaries, offenders, terrorists, violent extremists, and so on – may speak volumes both about how the practitioners treat them, and about how they contribute to their desistance.

Beyond these individual considerations, some participants drew our attention to organizational issues. In order to be effective, professionals need to create a climate of safety and security. No VEO will agree to work with 'officials' unless they are convinced of the safety of both themselves and their families. Knowing the consequences of leaving radicalized networks (see for instance Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2019) it should not come as a surprise that many VEOs in prison may feel threatened or vulnerable. Unfortunately, in some jurisdictions, VEOs may feel that they are endangered, not only from former comrades but also from state authorities. In these circumstances, one of the first duties of the professionals is to help the VEOs feel safe and secure. This can also help the learning process, as we know from the literature that the brain is unable to learn in a negative context (see Porges, 2011).

Before delving into the archaeology of relationship work, it is important to mention that violent extremist offenders constitute a very heterogenic group; their behavior can be driven by ideology, identity issues or a search for belonging; they can be socially outcast; they can be highly or poorly educated. What most of the VEOs share is a deep distrust and open hostility towards the state and state authorities. Paranoid attitudes and psychiatric difficulties sometimes add to the profile of the client group. All these features make these VEOs hard to reach or extreme-others with whom relationship-building work is a difficult undertaking (Cherney et al, 2021:19; Manchak et al, 2014; Skeem et al, 2007).

Doing the Working Alliance

Before the first meeting

To our surprise, in most cases, practitioners enter the room empty-handed, with very little information about the clients. To know only the client's name and offence is a common experience for the participants we have interviewed. This reality can be explained in many ways. In some cases, the practitioners are not part of the prison system, and therefore their access to information is limited. In other cases, information about VEOs is considered sensitive and therefore it is not shared outside intelligence circles. This is what Sageman

(2014) called the knowledge gap between analytic expertise and those who have the data. One exception comes from a jurisdiction in which the professionals have a preparatory meeting with prison guards and intelligence prior to meeting the VEOs. During this meeting, all relevant information is shared with the professionals, so they are more confident and ready to start the work.

During the first meetings

According to the participants, the aim of the first interviews is both to 'get to know the client' and to start setting up the Working Alliance. The exception to this rule is when the practitioner conducts the so-called evaluation interview or intake interview, when there is very limited time in which to carry out an assessment for the court or another authority. In this case, all relationship tactics are deployed minimally in order to allow more time for data collection. In this article, we will focus more on the rehabilitation/disengagement type of work, because this is the context in which the professionals have more space to use and elaborate relationship skills. This does not mean that in some cases, professionals do not allow time for the evaluation interviews. On the contrary, professionals in two jurisdictions involved in this study described quite lengthy procedures, even for this type of interview.

Most of the participants would start the first meeting with a brief self-introduction: name, role, who they work for, and how they can be useful for the client. At this stage, participants seem to make an effort to differentiate themselves from other categories of justice professionals:

"*I say that my focus is on them and their wellbeing."* (Participant 2)

It is of utmost importance here to be as transparent and honest as possible:

"*At this point, when we get involved, it is important to be transparent and honest … you know … to be straightforward with everything.*" (Participant 3)

Some participants are aware of the power imbalance between the VEOs and themselves, and that this can cause reactance in some cases. In order to avoid this, and to

develop as much rapport between both parties as possible, participants tend to maximize the choices that clients have:

> "*I introduce myself and tell them that it doesn't matter how good I am or how good the program is, if the client isn't there, nothing will happen.*" (Participant 2)

> "*I would ask the client to share whatever s/he feels comfortable to share …*" (Participant 1)

> "*I tell them from the beginning that I will ask them a lot of questions but if they do not want to answer them, it is ok.*" (Participant 2)

Another way of closing the power imbalance suggested by the participants is to invite the clients to ask questions. Being able to participate more actively in the dialogue, not just answering questions, gives the clients the impression that they are closer to the practitioner's position.

The same idea, of giving the client as much control as possible, was mentioned in various forms by other participants as well:

> "*I am not an expert. He is the expert of his own life.*" (Participant 2)

Participants who share an experiential background with the client (e.g. Muslim or former violent extremist) would make this obvious from the very beginning:

> "*… I have been in this environment, and I left many years ago…I think just to show that I understand a little bit the situation and this is usually helpful to build up trust.*" (Participant *1*)

One participant with the same religious beliefs as the clients tend to emphasize the commonality between him and the clients. Sometimes he uses props, such as dressing casually and having a beard, or other performative behaviors such as speaking Arabic.

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We may call these efforts to find common cultural, behavioral or social experiences with the clients searching for common ground. By doing so, practitioners encourage VEOs to believe that they share many aspects of their lives and that therefore they can understand each other.

The use of personal self-disclosure seems to serve another purpose. By speaking about themselves professionals differentiate themselves from the police or prosecution professionals. The conversation with the client is not based on the principle 'I ask, you answer' but more on the 'I share, you share' principle. As one participant stressed, sharing something about our own life or experience creates a kind of mutual pressure for reciprocity, which is a good step towards opening up:

"... I share a bit about my work and where I am coming from and what we do and how it works and then I would ask the client to share whatever he feels comfortable to share ..." (Participant 1)

However, as it was mentioned several times by the participants, it should be stressed here that professionals are not reaching out to VEOs in order to become friends, but rather to build good Working Alliances. This balance is not always easy to find or easy to explain to the VEOs. Common ground may be the same religion, the same previous experience ('I also broke my leg twice while playing football'), the same social origin ('I was born in the suburbs of Paris, so I know the challenges') or a common interest (in football, in history, and so on). In finding this ground, the worker should have a good sense of observation and intuition, features that score high on the emotional and social competence scale.

Another type of self-disclosure mentioned by the participants may be professional self-disclosure, which emphasizes the professional experience of the worker with similar clients. Although this type of self-disclosure is not as strong as personal self-disclosure, it can create the perception in the client that the worker is an expert, and therefore that s/he could be helpful.

At least three of the participants reported that it is essential to start from where the client is. Any assumption that the practitioner makes about the client places the professional

in a position of power, which may induce reactance. An example of avoiding making assumptions about the VEOs, and how this works, is offered by one of the participants:

"... as soon as you assume for the client, you have taken the position of power and control, so I rather start with ...."why are you here?". Maybe he will tell me that he was forced to do this and that, but he may also wonder what could happen to him here. He could ask me: "What will happen next? What can you do for me?" and then BOOM I gave him the opportunity to control what I will talk about. It is ok for him to feel in control." (Participant 4)

The next relationship technique mentioned by almost all participants is showing concern.

"*It's always about the persons themselves.*" (Participant 3)

It can be a concern for their security and safety. It can be a concern for their well-being in prison. It can be a concern for practical or personal issues. One participant gave an example of how she had helped her client deal with stress by teaching him how to use so-called diaphragm breathing. Another participant explained how he helped arrange moving a client to another cell in order to feel safer. Another example was a client who was helped by the practitioner to get tattoos removed that he found no longer represented him. In this context, some participants mentioned that the worker needs to share some kind of 'passion' or genuine interest in other people.

Non-verbal communication is very important when showing interest or concern. Tone of voice, body language, eye contact, and so on, are very important in showing the client that the practitioner is really there. Maintaining the same positional height as the client was also mentioned as a way to indicate a position of equal power.

As mentioned by at least two participants in the study, the emotional and social competency of the practitioner is essential here.

"*Social and emotional competency is very important: how to read signals, how to use your face, your voice or tone. All these small things are very important ...*

for some professionals, they come as an instinct, for others it comes from experience.” (Participant 1)

These competencies can help the practitioner to 'tune into' the client's world.

Participants also argued that practical help may be very useful in demonstrating real concern and desire to help. As one of the participants stated:

*“Even a little help, helps a lot.” (*Participant 5)

Furthermore, it has to be exercised in the most natural and human way:

*“It is nothing extraordinary to help someone.” (*Participant 1*)*

However, practical help should be exercised with care, and only within the deontological boundaries. As mentioned by one participant, some clients may be manipulative and could use practical help to reach their own unorthodox objectives.

The first interview or first interviews need to avoid confrontation. This can be difficult for some practitioners, as VEOs tend to show off or try to test them:

“They are going to run you through the mill, through a cycle of tests, and when you pass those tests, and to their surprise, they are going to say “I am really interested in what you are thinking. I really want to know what you have to say.” (Participant 6)

“*They send you all sorts of traps … You need to know how to avoid them …*” (Participant 2)

One of the most frequent traps that participants have described is an invitation to talk about the radical network (e.g. Al Qaeda, Al-Shabaab etc.). If the professional shows interest in this direction, the VEOs will conclude that the practitioner is more interested in intelligence work than in the client's well-being.

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Confrontation at this stage of the relationship would make the client think that '*you are not his ally, but a kind of referee, a person who says what is right or wrong, which is very parental in nature*' (SR6). On the contrary, as mentioned by one participant, the practitioner should here apply the technique of: listen, listen and listen.

To respond to these challenges or traps, participants in the study suggested some strategies, such as the use of open questions (e.g. 'Please tell me about ….'), paraphrasing and summarizing. As the clients speak, the practitioner has the opportunity to listen and to show concern and interest. As one participant usefully suggested, during this storytelling stage, the worker can use motivational interviewing techniques, such as affirmation (reflecting on the good actions or attitudes of the client), enhancing change-talk (reflecting on the intention/capacity/action to change) or ignoring sustain talk (the sort of messages that support the status quo).

By listening to the clients, the practitioners validate their experiences. This does not mean that they approve or disapprove of these experiences. Quite the opposite, this means an acknowledgement that these experiences have happened, and the clients engage with them at the same time as the practitioners. According to most of the participants, listening is important all the way through the rehabilitation process, but it is particularly crucial in the first few sessions during which trust is established.

Another important aim of the first interview(s) is to help clients feel safe and relaxed. Tactics employed in order to reach this objective listed by participants included: the use of humor, empathy, showing kindness and generosity:

> "*I try to make them feel comfortable… I do that by making them laugh. It is extremely important that they see me as a human, as a person not as a prison guard or CIA agent.*" (Participant 2)

However, when people are fragile or anxious, the participants did not recommend the use of humor. Moreover, 'disparagement humor' (e.g. humiliating people, sexist jokes etc.) should not be practiced.

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Moving to the next stage

Although relationship work is a continuous effort, deradicalization or disengagement work implies moving on to the next stage that is more focused on the process of change. Relationship work is still relevant, but it recedes into the background. It can be thought of as akin to the relationship between music and its rhythm, or that between blood pressure and the body's health system.

The question is: when do we know that we have enough relationship to move on to the next stage, which is more focused on treatment and change? Participants responded in different ways to this question. Some of them stated that we have enough relationship when the VEO seems to be relaxed and comfortable in the relationship, when s/he seems to enjoy talking with the practitioner. This can be observed in body language. One participant referred to the use of body mirroring that is specific to the neuro-linguistic approach[4]. Other signs that can be used as markers indicating a good relationship are fewer lies, more open postures, more change talk, less sustain talk (see also the literature on motivational interviewing), and so on.

Moving on to the treatment phase may also be signaled by the VEO taking the initiative to start talking about a new life after release. This can take many forms: the client may display anxiety regarding how s/he will be accepted into his/her family or community after release; s/he may get in contact with her/his family; s/he may start making concrete plans for a job etc. For some participants in the study, these would be signs of readiness for change and disengagement:

"*I know I can move on when he is not lying to me anymore.*" (Participant 6)

Obviously, in order to progress to this point, the practitioner spends a lot of time – sometimes between 5 to 30 sessions – to create a Working Alliance, and also to motivate the clients to change. In this respect, motivational interviewing tactics can be fundamental in enhancing the Working Alliance. What stems from this observation is that Working Alliance

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[4] According to this theory, if the client is following/mirroring the gestures made by the worker, it means s/he is feeling comfortable and that s/he trusts the worker.

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strategies should not be used in isolation from other rehabilitation interventions. On the contrary, these methods should be used in dialogue with each other as the situation requires.

The don'ts of Working Alliance

The above sections have dealt mainly with 'do's'. In their accounts, the participants also mentioned a few 'don'ts' – tactics or behaviors which should be avoided when working with VEOs. One of the most important recommendations emerging for the participants' accounts is to not speak about the client's terrorist activity, or about her/his participation in radical networks during the early sessions. Should the practitioner do this, s/he will only confirm the client's false expectations that all professionals work for state intelligence.

The second 'don't' is the use of confrontation. The first few interviews are for getting to know the client, and for starting to establish Working Alliance; not for gathering information or for carrying out treatment on the client. Confrontation only antagonizes the client and makes her/him even more resistant.

Another subject that can be sensitive for VEOs to discuss in early interviews is religion. For some radicalized VEOs, their understanding of religion might be the center of their universe or identity. It should not come as a surprise to see that they are not yet ready to debate it with anyone, especially with 'infidels' whom they met for the first time.

Most participants also advised not to take notes during the first interviews. If the practitioner must take notes, s/he should explain exactly why s/he is doing so, who will have access to these notes, and whether the client can also consult them.

How to deal with crisis?

As in any relationship, Working Alliance between practitioner and client sometimes encounters difficult periods. When asked to give examples, participants cited drop-out as the most important crisis in their line of work. In order to avoid this, they employ several tactics that are worth listing here. An interesting example is one from Sweden in which the practitioner asks the client from the very first meeting to grant one further meeting, in case s/he is considering dropping out of the treatment. As s/he stated, all clients on the verge of

dropping out remembered this promise and agreed to meet the worker for one last time. In all cases, they agreed to return to the treatment.

In other cases, practitioners made an extra effort to show concern for the VEOs by performing different actions such as visiting the person in her/his cell, and so on. Working in pairs, as in the Netherlands, also looks like a promising practice, as it provides more resources and skills that can enable the establishment of a Working Alliance. Conducting the interview with such a team was a lived example of how two professionals can complement each other and bring more fuel into the dialogue.

Other examples of crisis are hostility or fury from the client. In this case, the participants first responded by acknowledging these feelings and reflecting them back to the client. By doing so, the workers ventilate the client's feelings and allow her/him to verbalize them. Once the 'temperature' is at an optimum level, the practitioner can start to explore the causes of these feelings. Sometimes there may be some misunderstandings regarding the practitioner's expectations. On other occasions there may be a break of trust, and so on. The latter was brought up several times as a major source of crisis, especially in the context of the paranoia and anxiety which accompany some VEOs. In all these cases, the participants argued that open discussions are advisable. In cases where the professional is responsible for some of these misunderstandings, they need to admit this openly and make the necessary adjustments.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study align closely with existing literature on the importance of a Working Alliance in interventions with VEOs. Similar to the literature, this study underscores the necessity of trust, empathy, and cultural sensitivity in building effective relationships (Dean, 2016; Horgan, 2009; Williams, 2017). Moreover, the findings of this study align with Koehler et al. (2023), who argue for the inclusion of factual accuracy as a critical component in deradicalization counseling. Their research indicates that accurate and truthful communication not only supports the development of a strong Working Alliance but also plays a pivotal role in challenging and dismantling extremist narratives. This reinforces the need for a multi-faceted approach that includes both relational and informational integrity in interventions with VEOs. However, it goes a step further by providing detailed strategies and

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practical examples from practitioners' experiences, addressing the previously identified gap regarding the lack of concrete guidelines for creating a Working Alliance (Cherney et al, 2021; Lauland et al, 2019).

Notably, the study highlights the importance of finding common ground and the use of personal and professional self-disclosure, strategies that are underemphasized in the literature. Additionally, it underscores the significance of non-verbal communication and practical help in demonstrating genuine concern and building trust, contributing valuable insights that can enhance existing frameworks and interventions (Rex, 1999; Porges, 2011).

One of the most important takeaways from this study is the importance of individualized interventions tailored to the specific cultural, religious, and ideological backgrounds of VEOs (Dean, 2012; Williams, 2017). Practitioners highlighted the need for cultural sensitivity and the adaptation of strategies to meet the unique needs of each offender, thereby fostering a deeper sense of trust and cooperation.

Participants also emphasized the importance of preparatory work before engaging with VEOs. This includes self-awareness, understanding one's own biases, and developing a non-judgmental attitude. Such preparation is crucial for practitioners to approach VEOs effectively, ensuring they can navigate the initial stages of relationship building without confrontation (Cherney et al, 2021). The initial stages of engagement should avoid confrontation and sensitive topics, such as religion or the VEOs' past activities. This approach prevents reinforcing negative perceptions and instead focuses on creating a safe and supportive environment for dialogue (Cherney et al, 2021).

The language used by practitioners significantly impacts the rehabilitation process. Avoiding terms that dehumanize or stigmatize offenders, such as "terrorists," and instead using more neutral terms like "clients" or "beneficiaries" can help reduce barriers to reintegration and encourage positive engagement (see also Horgan, 2009).

Practical strategies for building trust include self-disclosure, finding common ground, and showing genuine concern for the VEOs' well-being. These approaches help in establishing a rapport that goes beyond professional boundaries, making the practitioner appear more relatable and trustworthy (Rex, 1999). The role of non-verbal communication cannot be overstated. Practitioners need to be mindful of their body language, tone of voice, and eye contact to convey empathy and understanding effectively. Maintaining an equal

positional height and using non-confrontational gestures can significantly enhance the practitioner's ability to build rapport with VEOs (Porges, 2011).

The study also provided insights into managing crises, such as drop-outs or hostility. Strategies include setting up agreements for an additional meeting in case of dropout considerations and showing extra concern through actions like visiting the VEOs in their cells. These measures help maintain continuity and demonstrate the practitioner's commitment to the VEOs' rehabilitation.

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive examination of the Working Alliance between practitioners and violent extremist offenders, offering practical strategies and insights that complement and enhance existing literature. By emphasizing the importance of individualized approaches, cultural sensitivity, the truthful and accurate communication, and non-verbal communication, the study underscores the multifaceted nature of effective engagement with VEOs.

The findings highlight the need for standardized education and training programs that equip practitioners with the necessary attitudes, values, and self-awareness to navigate the complexities of working with this distinct group. Establishing a climate of safety and security, avoiding confrontational topics, and demonstrating genuine concern are critical components of a successful Working Alliance.

Future research should continue to explore the practical aspects of relationship building, focusing on strategies for integrating ideological factors and collaborative goal-setting into rehabilitation efforts. By bridging the gap between research and practice, more effective interventions that support the desistance and reintegration of violent extremist offenders could be developed, ultimately contributing to a safer and more cohesive society.

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