

British Psychological Society Division of Forensic Psychology: Ethical considerations in applied psychological practice in the field of extremism, violent extremism and terrorism

Acknowledgement and Authorship:

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Background

These guidelines are intended for practitioner psychologists involved in work related to extremism, violent extremism or terrorism, either in the prevention of a first terrorist offence, or working with those after the event to prevent re-offending. Within a pluralist society, working with those whose motivation is ostensibly political carries particular ethical challenges which these guidelines seek to clarify.

Ethical considerations specific to extremism are listed under the four key ethical principles of the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (Respect, Responsibility, Competence and Integrity) and the HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics. This document should be read in conjunction with these two documents and the BPS Professional Practice Guidelines.

1. Respect for the Dignity of Persons and Peoples

Statement of Values: Practitioner psychologists value the dignity and worth of all persons, with sensitivity to the dynamics of perceived authority or influence over persons and peoples (and) with particular regard to people's rights.

In applying these values, practitioner psychologists should consider:

- Privacy and confidentiality
- Respect
- Communities and shared values within them
- Impacts on the broader environment – living or otherwise
- Issues of power
- Consent
- Self-determination
- The importance of compassionate care, including empathy, sympathy, generosity, openness, distress tolerance, commitment and courage

The HCPC standards of conduct, performance and ethics also outline the need for practitioner psychologists to promote and protect the interests of service users and carers - including treating service users and carers with respect, making sure consent is provided and challenging discrimination – and respecting confidentiality, including using and disclosing information appropriately.

Specific ethical considerations include:

- 1.1 Practitioner psychologists should familiarise themselves with the terms Extremism, Violent Extremism and Terrorism, as defined by relevant policy and legislation¹. A Glossary is provided at the end of this document to assist practitioner psychologists with the current definitions in this field and their provenance. These labels can be contentious. In practice it is important for practitioner psychologists to retain a professional focus on the illegal and/or harmful behaviour associated with these terms and its assessment and management, avoiding where possible labels that may be experienced as stigmatising.
- 1.2 Practitioner psychologists should be aware of the limits of privacy and confidentiality that can be extended to those who have committed a terrorist offence. Whilst they should explain the limitations of privacy and confidentiality to all clients there may be additional factors to consider with those convicted of terrorist-related offences. These include the possibility that information may be accessed by a range of agencies with a duty to protect national security. They should make these limits of confidentiality explicit to all stakeholders to include the client before any work commences. The use of a well thought through clear and unambiguous written consent form should be considered taking into account the clients understanding of consent and appropriate strategies employed (such as use of an interpreter) where required.
- 1.3 As with all offenders, seeking informed and explicit consent for those charged with or convicted of a terrorist offence is important. The same consent procedures should be followed as are required for other offenders and that accord with the principles and standards of the BPS Practice Guidelines and HCPC standards of conduct, performance and ethics. Written consent from the offender will be required to access information from certain other agencies (e.g. National Health Service), and practitioner psychologists should clarify the limitations of any information used to inform their assessment.
- 1.4 Practitioner psychologists may be asked to conduct work with those who have not been arrested, convicted or sentenced for terrorism or terrorism-related offences but who are under suspicion. In these circumstances, practitioner psychologists should be sensitive to an individual's legal status and seek consent to interview them. They should encourage their clients' engagement and be open about the nature of their role and the potential benefits of engagement both for the individual and for the safety of the general public. They should also acknowledge the limitations of predictions of harm based on pre-criminal behaviour.
- 1.5 Every individual has a right, particularly in a democratic society to hold and express their own beliefs within the limits of the law, and practitioner psychologists may be hesitant about challenging these in the context of terrorist offending. However, challenging beliefs and attitudes where these are in themselves significant to offending behaviour, within a formulation on an individual, is central in forensic psychological practice, and the same applies to terrorism offences. Where beliefs are challenged, practitioner psychologists should have a very clear rationale for their actions and should do so in a sensitive and respectful way that invites clients to consider, address or change their beliefs in the context of a collaborative and therapeutic dialogue.
- 1.6 In working with extremism, practitioner psychologists should be mindful about how their practice may be viewed by the communities from which their clients are drawn. They should avoid stigmatising individuals or their communities and seek instead to build understanding and respect and encourage inclusion.
- 1.7 Practitioner psychologists may be exposed to societal pressures and fears surrounding the terrorist threat. In these circumstances psychologists should have a clear awareness of their personal views

and ensure their professional role is not impacted by personal or societal attitudes that may influence their assessment. They should remain aware that regardless of societal, political and organisational pressures they have a duty to remain objective in their judgements.

1.8 As with other offences, practitioner psychologists should separate the person from the crime and maintain respect for the offender. This is the basis for a trusting and meaningful engagement that can promote and encourage change. A relationship based on trust, respect, understanding and empathy with a professional with different beliefs may provide a unique opportunity to alter any hostile perceptions of those who have taken up an oppositional position. Conducting therapeutic work in a spirit of openness, empathy and compassion can help to counter the attitudes associated with violent extremism, such as dogmatism, righteousness and the dehumanization of others.

1.9 Practitioner psychologists need courage to embark on work which may be without precedent and be the subject of intense and sometimes hostile scrutiny, in the knowledge that they can make a vital and distinct contribution. Whilst acknowledging the limitations of the evidence base, psychologists should, where appropriate, apply relevant psychological methodology (e.g. individual and collaborative case formulation) where they believe this will be of clinical or therapeutic benefit to the client. Practitioner psychologists are trained to undertake multi-level analysis of complex behaviour (e.g. individual, social and political/cultural), and understand the psycho-social dynamics of group behaviour, and often apply this knowledge to complex presentations. Therefore, the lack of an established knowledge base in the field of terrorism should not in itself discourage practitioner psychologists from seeking to build one.

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2. Competence

Statement of Values: Practitioner psychologists value their responsibilities to persons and peoples, and to the profession and science of psychology, including the avoidance of harm and the prevention of misuse or abuse of their contributions to society.

In applying these values, practitioner psychologists should consider:

- Possession or otherwise of appropriate skills and care needed to serve persons and peoples
- The limits of their competence and the potential need to refer on to another professional
- Advances in the evidence base
- The need to maintain technical and practical skills
- Matters of professional ethics and decision-making
- Any limitations to their competence to practise taking mitigating actions as necessary

The HCPC standards of conduct, performance and ethics also outline the need for practitioner psychologists to work within the limits of their knowledge and skills – including keeping within their scope of practice and maintaining and developing their knowledge and skills, and to delegate appropriately.

Specific ethical considerations include:

- 2.1 Practitioner psychologists working in this area should be familiar with key literature on the psychology of terrorism and/or violent extremism which is developing rapidly as knowledge and understanding grows. However, there are other sources of knowledge from the political science and sociological literature, and from non-governmental organisations and personal accounts. Psychologists should be open to using information from such sources to inform their work, but should also be explicit about their limitations and their competence to interpret these from their own cultural perspective.
- 2.2 Practitioner psychologists should remain aware of and keep updated about government policy in the field of counter-terrorism and extremism and their legal and professional duties in relation to this.

- 2.3 Practitioner psychologists working in this area should complete the appropriate training for using specific products designed for assessment or intervention with individuals who have committed terrorist offences. They should seek to use those specifically developed for this purpose that are informed by psychological theory, principles and evidence. They should also keep up to date with the literature on developments with such tools or approaches.
- 2.4 When acting as professional or expert witnesses, practitioner psychologists should clearly stipulate the limits of their expertise in this field, and where their access to information is limited by its sensitivity, this should be clearly stated. Limitations may also take the form of a lack of understanding of the cultural, political, linguistic or theological aspects of the case.
- 2.5 Extremist violence and terrorism touches on other fields of practice such as history, socio-economics, politics and religion. Without aiming to become experts in these areas, practitioner psychologists should take action to close gaps in their knowledge that may detract from their ability to fully understand the context of their client's offending or radicalisation pathway. They should also ensure that they have supervision in place from someone who has the necessary knowledge, experience and skills to assist them in this.
- 2.6 The media calls on many 'experts' from different disciplines, organizations and agencies for comment on terrorist attacks or for insights into the motivations and character of those involved, including academics, 'experts through experience' or 'formers'. Practitioner psychologists should only comment if they have the expertise to do so and should not risk bringing their profession into disrepute. Credible experts should be Chartered Psychologists (BPS) or Registered Psychologists (HCPC) AND include: 1) those with significant experience, 2) those that have developed psychologically informed approaches, tools or guidelines with national or international reach, 3) those with experience of working directly with this client group, 4) those with media training and experience of presenting to their peers.
- 2.7 Practitioner psychologists should recognise that their work may be subject to particular scrutiny by other agencies, the media or members of the public. All work should be conducted and reported with due consideration for the possibility that it could become the subject of significant public interest.
- 2.8 Practitioner psychologists should only provide opinion on issues directly related to their experience and expertise. Before agreeing to any media engagements they should assess whether the intended benefits of their contribution - such as informing the wider debate - outweigh the potential drawbacks such as undermining their work with individuals or trusted bodies, or risking the reputation of their profession if contributions are untimely, inappropriate or could be misconstrued.
- 2.9 Practitioner psychologists should be aware of and use as appropriate national and international resources and networks to inform and support their work. Practitioner psychologists should ensure that the resources that they use are the most current, in particular in relation to legislation. This is an area where considerable new learning is emerging and Policies, Strategies and Guidance documents are being regularly updated to reflect this. Appendix 1 provides some key resources that are current at the time of the publication of these guidelines but this should not be considered exhaustive.

3. Responsibility

Statement of Values: Practitioner psychologists value their responsibilities to persons and peoples, to the general public, and to the profession and science of psychology, including the avoidance of harm and the prevention of misuse or abuse of their contribution to society.

In applying these values, psychologists should consider:

- Professional accountability
- Responsible use of their knowledge and skills
- Caution in making knowledge claims
- Respect for the welfare of human, non-humans and the living world
- Potentially competing duties.

The HCPC standards of conduct, performance and ethics also outline the need for practitioner psychologists to communicate appropriately and effectively - with service users and carers, colleagues and when using social media and networking sites - to identify, reduce and manage risk, to report and follow-up concerns about safety and to consider their own health.

Specific ethical considerations include:

- 3.1 Practitioner psychologists need to be aware of how their own attitudes and behaviour may impact on clients. A strong awareness of and ability to reflect upon the influence and any implications of their own political, moral and religious views and attitudes will help to ensure that their objectivity is maintained and clients extreme views are not reinforced.
- 3.2 Practitioner psychologists have a responsibility to contribute their knowledge, skills and values in this field where this has the potential to benefit both individuals in need and wider society. Such contributions include designing, developing and implementing assessments and interventions, and growing an evidence base from empirical beginnings, informed by psychological analysis, standards and values, where alternatives would arguably be less evidence-based, systematic, effective or defensible.
- 3.3 Practitioner psychologists have a responsibility to remain ethically aware in this area of work. Where a psychologist feels that an employer or commissioner requires them to work for purposes that are not consistent with their code of conduct, it is their responsibility to identify this and adhere to their code of conduct. They should consult with their professional peers if they are in any doubt about what constitutes appropriate professional practice.
- 3.4 Practitioner psychologists should recognise that psychological practice in the field of violent extremism remains in its infancy. Although an evidence base is building there is, to date, limited rigorous empirical data to reference in supporting knowledge claims in this field. They should therefore avoid making dogmatic, definitive and unsubstantiated statements of 'truth', and be particularly mindful of how they communicate their knowledge, acknowledging its limitations and welcoming debate and critiquing of their claims.
- 3.5 Practitioner psychologists should be aware that working in this field may bring particular stresses and pressures from the sometimes competing expectations of different agencies, the interpersonal challenge of some clients and issues around the safety and security of both themselves and their clients. They should ensure they have regular supervision and peer support to build and maintain their resilience to such stresses and to retain a professional sounding board to provide a perspective on their practice.
- 3.6 Practitioner psychologists should be especially vigilant regarding their own safety and security (and those of family members) when working directly with individuals known to be associated with violent extremist groups. Such individuals or groups may actively seek to disrupt this work through

intimidation, threats or acts of violence. There should be clear procedures in place prior to any work commencing to prevent or manage such incidents. These may include being alert to clients seeking personal details and being cautious in sharing personal details on social media.

- 3.7 Practitioner psychologists also need to be particularly sensitive to and vigilant about the safety and welfare of clients, especially those seeking to disengage from a violent extremist group. Such actions may put clients at considerable risk from those wishing to prevent this. Practitioner psychologists should monitor their clients' safety throughout the period of any assessment or intervention, checking regularly about such risks or other consequences such as social exclusion and/or emotional distress.

4. Integrity

Statement of Values: Practitioner psychologists value honesty, probity, accuracy, clarity and fairness in their interactions with all persons and peoples, and seek to promote integrity in all facets of their scientific and professional endeavours.

In applying these values, practitioner psychologists should consider:

- Honesty, openness and candour
- Accurate unbiased representation
- Fairness
- Avoidance of exploitation and conflicts of interest (including self-interest)
- Maintaining personal and professional boundaries
- Addressing misconduct

The HCPC standards of conduct, performance and ethics also outline the need for practitioner psychologists to maintain appropriate boundaries, to be open when things go wrong - including being open with service users and carers and in dealing with concerns and complaints - to be honest and trustworthy in personal and professional behaviour as well as to keep accurate and secure records.

Specific ethical considerations include:

- 4.1 Practitioner psychologists should be aware that professional values such as openness, honesty and candour may sit in stark contrast to those adopted by violent extremist groups. This puts them in a potentially influential position in terms of modelling a more inclusive and respectful way of relating to others, if barriers to communication can be overcome.
- 4.2 A significant challenge for practitioner psychologists undertaking this work is establishing a working relationship with those whose offending has been motivated by antagonism to government(s). Practitioner psychologists should not seek to hide the fact that their work may be undertaken on behalf of the state, but strive to create a safe and respectful space in which a constructive relationship can be nurtured.
- 4.3 Practitioner psychologists should also be aware that being commissioned and paid by government can be perceived negatively by individuals or the groups they are associated with and lead to a tendency for those individuals to discredit and undermine their work in this field. Practitioner psychologists need to be clear about their position, and be prepared to articulate this before embarking on face-to-face work with those who may challenge their role. Communicating their professional values, being

explicit about their agenda, showing compassion for their clients' challenges and setbacks and taking a pragmatic approach can all be effective ways forward.

- 4.4 Practitioner psychologists may be more sympathetic to certain causes and less sympathetic to others. This may operate outside of their awareness and hinder their ability to work in an even-handed way across the spectrum of terrorist offending. It is helpful to remember that the target for intervention is the harmful and/or illegal behaviour and not an individual's general belief system. Practitioner psychologists should avoid working with clients whose causes they are particularly sympathetic or unsympathetic towards, or ensure that any attitudinal biases are monitored in supervision and mitigated.
- 4.5 Practitioner psychologists conducting face-to-face work with individuals should appreciate that one of the most powerful tools they have is their ability to demonstrate their own humanity and respect for the welfare of others, including their clients. This is important regardless of their crime, race, age, gender, religion, nationality or any other distinguishing feature. Such an approach has the potential to encourage clients to reconsider how they themselves may categorise others in ways that justify harm.
- 4.6 Terrorist attacks are designed to achieve an impact on society far beyond their immediate victims, amplified by widespread reporting in TV and newspapers and through the debates that follow in social media. Practitioner psychologists are not immune from this impact and need to recognise the potential risk aversion this may induce in the context of risk assessment. It is important that psychologists retain an objective and proportionate approach to this task. When practitioner psychologists are part of a community that has been the target of a terrorist attack they should be aware of the potential impact of this on their attitudes towards clients who have carried out such attacks. This is not uncommon with other forensic clients who may have targeted victims with whom practitioner psychologists may identify, and supervision and support can help to maintain objectivity. Not all will be comfortable working with those convicted of terrorist offences, and those who find it difficult should be able to avoid it without censure.
- 4.7 The professional background of practitioner psychologists allows them to take a distinct and influential role with their partners and stakeholders in this field. Practitioner psychologists' standards and values can influence the work of others to ensure that policies and procedures remain fair, proportionate and effective. They should not be afraid to express their values of integrity and probity and challenge other stakeholders whose actions may be undermining of their colleagues or amount to misconduct or impropriety.
- 4.8 This field, arguably more than most, poses complex challenges that make the balance of responsibility (e.g. to reduce harm) and integrity (e.g. openness) a highly nuanced one. There may be some instances where practitioner psychologists are privy to highly sensitive information about risk that they are not able to disclose to the client but upon which they are duty-bound to base their judgements. Some may be subject to heightened security vetting and be responsible for sensitive information that is not in their gift to disclose to their clients. In these circumstances practitioner psychologists have a duty to balance a complexity of responsibilities: to their clients, to the public/national security, and to their employer/organisation. Practitioner psychologists should therefore familiarise themselves with the complexity of their duties, roles and potential consequences of their actions, and identify an ethical balance that supports their practice and is commensurate with their professional code of conduct.

Glossary

All definitions are taken from HM Government's Prevent Duty Guidance (HM Government, Revised Prevent Duty Guidance: for England and Wales. Revised 16th July 2015. London: HM Stationery Office. ISBN: 978-1-78246-793) unless otherwise specified.

Client: A person with whom a psychologist interacts on a professional basis (British Psychological Society Draft Practice Guidelines, December 2016).

Extremism: The vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also include in our definition of extremism calls for the death of members of our armed forces, whether in this country or overseas. (Revised Prevent Duty Guidance for England and Wales, originally issued on 12th March 2015 and revised on 16th July 2015, paragraph 7).

Extremist offenders: are those whose offences are committed in association with a group, cause or ideology that propagates extremist views and actions and justifies the use of violence and other illegal activities in pursuit of its objectives. (Extremist Offenders Working Group, NOMS 2007)

Radicalisation: The process by which a person comes to support terrorism and extremist ideologies associated with terrorist groups.

Violent Extremism: Extremism accompanied by violence.

Terrorism: An action that endangers or causes serious violence to a person/people; causes serious damage to property; or seriously interferes or disrupts an electronic system. The use of threat must be designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public and is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause (Terrorism Act 2000).

Terrorist-related offences: Are those (such as murder) which are not offences in terrorist legislation, but which are judged by HMPPS to have been committed in relation to terrorism.

APPENDIX 1 : Suggested Resources

The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN): focuses on supporting practitioners in countering violent extremism across education, health, prisons and probation, families and communities, law enforcement and victims.

https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network_en

The Global Counter-Terrorism Forum on the Role of Psychology and Psychologists in the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Violent Extremist Offenders: focuses on the role of psychology and psychologists and good practices in the rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremist offenders.

<https://toolkit.thegctf.org/document-sets/additional-guidance-role-psychologistspsychology-rehabilitation-and-reintegration>

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Handbook on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Prisons: provides practical guidelines for managers and practitioners working in prisons and community services in this field.

https://www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal_justice/Handbook_on_VEPs.pdf

Council of Europe Handbook for Prison and Probation Services Regarding Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: provides practical guidelines for managers and practitioners working in prison and probation services in this field.

<https://rm.coe.int/16806f9aa9>

HM Government Counter-Extremism Strategy: provides information about the governments counter-extremism strategy, including how this applies across different sectors.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470088/51859_Cm9148_Accessible.pdf

HM Government Prevent Duty Guidance: provides information about the statutory responsibilities organisations and individuals have for reporting and responding to concerns about individuals being drawn into terrorism.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance#history>

Preventing Extremism in Schools and Children's Services: what the government is doing to prevent extremism in the education and children's services sectors.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-extremism-in-schools-and-childrens-services>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/islamist-extremism-in-prisons-probation-and-youth-justice/summary-of-the-main-findings-of-the-review-of-islamist-extremism-in-prisons-probation-and-youth-justice>