

Terminological clarifications about so-called “violent extremism” and suggestions for avoiding and replacing the term “extremism” – with reference to the tentative OppAttune concept of “everyday extremism”¹

OppAttune WP5 concept note _#2

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This series of publications (c.f. footnote 1; publications on “distancing work”, formerly called deradicalisation) edited by the Center for the Prevention of Right-Wing Extremism (fa:rp, established by OppAttune-partner Cultures Interactive e.V./ NGO) is the result of many years of work that Cultures Interactive has been carrying out and continuously develops since its founding in 2005 in numerous different communities and in dealing with different social phenomena within and beyond young people’s lives. Based on this experience – as well as for professional, methodological and scholarly reasons – distancing work is principally understood as “cross-phenomenal”, i.e. it refers to the work done in preventing all forms of anti-democratic and anti-human rights thinking and behaviour – in particular all forms of “Group Focused Enmity”, in Germany and Europe.² Moreover, for the same reasons these publications on distancing work seek to exceed and eventually phase out the use of the term of “extremism”.

This “cross-phenomenal” perspective is the result of many years of practitioners’ observations indicating that the approaches of prevention in the various areas of anti-democratic and anti-human rights phenomena (e.g. so-called “right-wing extremism”, so-called “Islamism”, forms of Group Focused Enmity/ Group Hatred and similar phenomena) are often fundamentally similar in their methodology. Also these phenomena as such, at closer look, turn out to be quite similar in what they actually mean for the young people involved,

¹ This concept note builds on a translation from German of the terminological preface: “Vorbemerkung zum Phänomenbezug und den verwendeten Begriffen”, in the publication: Cultures Interactive e.V. (2022): “Distanzierungsarbeit/ 1. Grundlagen und methodische Leitlinien. (Distancing work/ deradicalisation 1. Basic principles and methodological guidelines); https://www.cultures-interactive.de/files/publikationen/Flyer%20Broschueren%20Dokumentationen/2022_Distanzierungsarbeit_01.pdf.

² Andreas Zick, Beate Küpper, Andreas Hövermann (2011): “Intolerance, Prejudice and Discrimination. A European Report (Friedrich Ebert Foundation). There in the chapter: “Prejudice and Group-focused Enmity” 27-42.

aside of descriptive differences between them which seem compellingly ostensibly, but often proven little meaningful as differentiating criteria.

Hence, already the “cross-phenomenal” perspective implicitly goes beyond and renders obsolete the term “extremism”, since forms of “Group Focused Enmity”³ are to be found within the presumably “normal” mainstream of communities and societies as such.⁴ However, even aside of recognising the need for a “cross-phenomenal” perspective, many of these practitioners’ observations and experiences indicated the numerous drawbacks and deficiencies of the concept of “extremism” (some of which are outlined in “OppAttune WP5 concept note _#1”⁵).

The tentative OppAttune concept “everyday extremism” – which made also imply a concept of “everybody’s extremism”, i.e. viewing what has been called extreme as something quite human and potentially normal – can be expected to be heuristically helpful in overcoming the current term of “violent extremism”.

Therefore, in order to emphasize the “cross-phenomenal” perspective and move towards leaving behind the term “extremism”, the terminology of this publication series’ basic chapters on conceptual and methodological issues and on quality criteria proceeds as follows:

Wherever conceptually possible and linguistically appropriate, both major phenomenal areas are mentioned together - i.e., "right-wing extremism" and "so-called Islamism" or "religiously based extremism." Implicitly or sometimes explicitly, wherever possible, all other phenomena of "hostility to democracy and human rights" are addressed or included.

Complementary to this, the two major phenomenal areas are only mentioned alone, i.e. without simultaneous mention of the second major phenomenon area, if this is necessary due to the linguistic or content context. Wherever the term "Islamism" seems to be necessary due to the context and the general discourse in our field of activity, the term "so-called Islamism" will be used wherever possible. Otherwise and whenever possible the term "religiously based extremism" will be used. This is to take account of the problematic nature of the term "Islamism", which tends to implicate an entire religious community and carries an intrinsic reference to a religion as such.

³ Andreas Zick, Beate Küpper, Andreas Hövermann (2011): “Intolerance, Prejudice and Discrimination. A European Report (Friedrich Ebert Foundation). There in the chapter: “Prejudice and Group-focused Enmity” 27-42.

⁴ However, individual contributions in this publication series, especially from non-CI staff authors use the term of right-wing extremism, also referring to historic National-Socialism in Germany, when writing about prevention and distancing work with young people affiliated with neo-Nazi organisations.

⁵ Xx Reiner Becker

Overall, the intent is to largely avoid the term "extremism," which is known to be associated with the so-called "horseshoe theory" (implying a binary opposition), is derived from the logic of security agencies and intelligence reports – and is fraught by numerous academic and political problems. Otherwise, the term "extremism" is, as far as possible, given the attribute "so-called" and, where possible, replaced by terms such as hostility to democracy rejection of human rights, Group Focused Enmity/ Group Hatred, ideologies of unequal value, inter alia. The concept of radicalization or deradicalization has also been called into question in numerous instances on various grounds, and rightly so. This series of publications addresses the current discourses in this field and its frequently called into question terms in such a way that it uses the phrase "prevention of anti-democratic and anti-human rights thinking and behaviour" – and "of all forms of "Group Focused Enmity", whenever possible.

Furthermore, we have also tried to find a terminological solution for the subdivision of so-called extremism prevention – into primary/universal, secondary/selective and tertiary/indexed prevention – which, too, has been repeatedly found to be unhelpful and misleading. In contrast, as explained in the publication's chapter on "Clarification in a Confusing Conceptual Situation," we propose to instead to employ a two-tiered concept of societal activity that distinguishes the areas of "(civic) education/ up-brining/ child and youth welfare" on the one hand and of specific "event-related preventive intervention and rehabilitation" on the other. However, it is important to note that both of these – neighbouring – areas (education // preventive intervention, rehabilitation) need to be clearly demarcated from the entirely different area of security/ police work/ intelligence – since both education and rehabilitation/ preventive intervention are educational by nature and require professional relationship work in fully confidential safe spaces.