

Bridging Wicked Problem and Violent Extremism Research

- A research agenda for understanding and assessing local capacity to prevent violent extremism

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***Abstract:** In this working paper, we argue that the conception of a wicked public policy problem offers a useful lens on the challenges faced by local government practitioners engaged with preventing violent extremism. Wicked problems are characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and contestation as to origin, definition and policy solutions. Based on extant wicked problem research, we propose a conceptual model of what we term “wicked problem governance capacity” – capacity to deal with wicked problems – and a research agenda for better understanding and assessing such policy capacity. We argue that empirical studies of Denmark and Norway, which have been among the frontrunners in local prevent work, offer an opportunity to refine wicked problem theory by grounding it more firmly in the experienced reality of practitioners.*

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1. Introduction

Scholars of terrorism have characterized their subject of study as a “wicked problem” (Fischbacher-Smith, 2016, 402; Noordegraaf et al., 2019, 285). Wicked problems defy centralized, bureaucratic steering, have no agreed upon definition, entail a high potential for political conflict, cut across institutional and sectoral boundaries, mutate when one attempts to tackle them, and have no final solutions (Rittel & Webber 1984, 136-142). In this working paper, we argue that the wicked problem notion offers a useful lens on the challenges faced by local practitioners engaged with preventing violent extremism.

Local authorities and communities are increasingly expected to engage in prevention efforts. The national strategies and “action plans” of countries like the US, Australia, the UK, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden all underline the need for local government and local communities to engage in the effort to prevent violent extremism (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Schack, 2016, 1). Building on preexisting local crime-prevention networks, Denmark and Norway have been among the frontrunners in taking a decentralized, multi-agency approach to prevent violent extremism.¹ While often held out as exemplars on the international level,² efforts have not been free from challenges and dilemmas, as elaborated in section 5 below. In this working paper we suggest that insights from the wicked problem literature may aid practitioners in better understanding and tackling these challenges and dilemmas. At the same time, empirical studies of the Nordic prevention models offer an opportunity to refine wicked problem theory by grounding it in the experience of practitioners.

In the following, we first introduce the literature on wicked problems and show how preventing radicalization into violent extremism displays many of the features of a wicked public policy problem. Second, we suggest a conceptual model of what we term “wicked problem governance capacity” by synthesizing insights from extant literature with a focus on how to tackle wicked problems in practice. Third, we briefly describe the Danish and

¹ The Danish and Norwegian models are not identical, but they resemble each other in central ways and the Norwegian model was built upon the Danish model. They entail networked collaboration between multiple agencies and professionals, like teachers, health workers, social workers and police staff, to tackle various problems that may afflict youth, such as social problems, crime, substance abuse or violent extremism (Gundhus, Egge, Strype & Myhrer, 2008; Pedersen & Stothard, 2015).

² Braw, E. 2014. “Inside Denmark’s Radical Jihadist De-Radicalisation Programme.” *Newsweek Magazine*; Approach <https://www.newsweek.com/denmark-offers-returning-jihadis-chance-repent-277622>; Crouch, D. 2015. “A way home for jihadis.” *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/23/home-jihadi-denmark-radical-islamic-extremism-aarhus-model-scandinavia>; Mansel, T. 2015. “How I was de-radicalised.” *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33344898> [all accessed on July 11, 2019].

Norwegian local prevention models and argue why these two country cases are particularly interesting. Finally, we suggest a research agenda that aims to ground wicked problem theory more firmly in the practice of local prevent workers and to leverage the wicked problem notion to better understand the challenges of tackling violent extremism and to assess local capacity to do so.

2. Extant Research on Wicked Problems

The term “wicked problem” was introduced by two US scholars, Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, in a 1973 article on “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning” (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Rittel and Webber pointed to a number of characteristics of wicked problems, including that they have no agreed upon definition, entail a high potential for political conflict, cut across institutional and sectoral boundaries, mutate when one attempts to tackle them, and have no final solutions. “Solutions” tend to produce unexpected outcomes and new problems and at times those new problems turn out to be of greater magnitude than the original problem. Wicked problems are often interlinked with other problems, posing distinct challenges also to evaluating the effect of the attempted “solutions.” This in turn complicates attempts to learn and develop consensus on what works and what does not work when it comes to handling the problem (Rittel & Webber 1984, 136-144).

The concept of wicked problem, while originally framed mainly as a criticism of then-dominant linear, rational choice approaches to public policy, caught on in many research fields, including public administration, urban planning, environmental studies, educational research etc. (Termeer, Dewulf, Biesbroek, 2019, 168). More recently scholars have attempted to nuance the conceptualization of wicked problems, criticizing the dichotomy originally indicated by Rittel and Webber, between “tame” or technical problems and “wicked” problems. The aim is to offer a concept that more accurately captures the reality and dynamism of diverse public policy problems. Scholars such as Head and Alford for example talk of “degrees of wickedness” or “dimensions of wickedness”. They have suggested that the higher the complexity of the problem, e.g. uncertainty about the definition and causal mechanisms behind the problem, and the more diversity of and level of disagreement between the stakeholders, the more wicked the problem (Head & Alford 2015, 717). Koppenjan and Klijn, argue along similar lines, distinguishing between substantive uncertainty (what is the nature and causes of the problem?), strategic uncertainty (what will be the strategies of different stakeholders and how will they interact?), and institutional uncertainty (will different professional and institutional regimes clash?) (Koppenjan & Klijn 2004, 6-7).

A related tendency in recent scholarly work on wicked problems is to focus more on actor perceptions. The perceived level of conflict and the normative judgments of the stakeholders, scholars like Noordegraaf et al. argue, are constitutive elements when determining the degree of wickedness of a public policy problem. A greater focus on the actor-level, they suggest,

should help move the focus away from essentialist ideas and discussions of the nature and characteristics of wicked problems towards a more dynamic and scalable concept of “wicked situations” (Noordegraaf et al. 2019, 293). Such a focus, they further argue, may also help ground wicked problem theory more firmly in the experienced reality of the people who seek to cope with wicked problems on a daily basis. They suggest “taking the debate of wicked problems such as terrorism or forced migration from the halls of universities or the front page of the New York Times to the Monday morning team meeting at the local police station.” (Noordegraaf et al., 2019, 281).

Though recent scholarship suggests a number of different defining characteristics and approaches of study, there seems to be a convergence on characterizing wicked problems as dynamic or evolving problems, where the stakeholders struggle to cope with large knowledge gaps, a high degree of conflicting values and interests, and very substantial institutional complexity (Noordegraaf et al., 2019, 280; Termeer et al., 2019, 171). For the purpose of this working paper, we rely on this general characterization of wicked problems.

3. Radicalization into Violent Extremism as a Wicked Problem

Rittel and Webber did not write about terrorism, and the bulk of research into wicked problems take place in research fields such as environmental studies, management studies, urban planning, and public administration (Termeer et al., 2019, 168). Yet, as suggested by a handful of researchers, the concept describes the phenomenon “terrorism” and “radicalization” particularly well (Fischbacher-Smith 2016, 402; Noordegraaf et al., 2019, 285).³ As argued below, it also captures the challenges of preventing violent extremism and radicalization – a field characterized by knowledge gaps, conflicts of values and interests, and a high degree of institutional complexity.

Scientific knowledge gaps

While there is consensus within the research community that the process of radicalization occurs over time (Neumann, 2013, p. 874), there is no agreed upon definition of radicalization itself or its causes. The various conceptualizations and models of radicalization vary from non-violent to violent, like “the quest to drastically alter society, possibly through the use of unorthodox means, which can result in a threat to the democratic structures and institutions” (Kortweg et al., 2010) or “the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology” (Horgan & Braddock, 2010)⁴. This ambiguity raises questions as to what we actually are trying to research, understand and consequently prevent or counter.

Prevention of radicalization, if it is to be effective, has to start with a recognition and utilization of factors or characteristics that are empirically found to be connected to radicalization. Even though great efforts have been made to identify factors that might lead to, or predict, radicalization, the findings are inconclusive. However, a broad conceptualisation of what radicalisation or violent extremism is about is acknowledged by the research community (Dalgaard-Nielsen; 2010; Grønnerød, Andersen & Hellevik, 2016; RAN; 2016) as multifactored, consisting of both individual, social, political, and religious dimensions and

³ Noordegraaf et al. suggest that terrorism is an extra wicked problem, which is “interwoven with other wicked issues (such as refugees and climate change), and is characterized by disruptive potential, political and public attention, performative effects of communication, and global organizational and financial infrastructures” (Noordegraaf et al. 2017, 390).

⁴ From Schmid, A., P. (2013). *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*. ICCT Research Paper, March 2013: <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf>

processes. Culture and identity issues and traumas are also included in this concept (RAN, 2016; Kruglanski et. al, 2018). The problem with the identified factors, like feelings of uncertainty and insignificance (Verkuyten, 2018; Hales & Williams, 2018; Webber et al., 2018; Compelo et al., 2018), or living in socioeconomic deprived areas (Coid et al., 2016; Peracha et al., 2014; Khalid & Leghari, 2014), is the risk of false positives. Identification of individuals at risk of radicalization is thus a task that cannot be based on standardized checklists and screening tools, if they are to be accurate in their assessments. In this light, it is perhaps not surprising that the concept of radicalization and extremism is understood in many different ways among Danish prevention workers. This may result in uneven practices across municipalities as well as confusion as to what represents a “sign of concern” and how prevention work should be carried out (Rambøll, 2018). Norwegian prevention workers seem to mainly understand radicalization as a social issue, but some nevertheless express uncertainty as to how to tackle it (Lid et al., 2016; Haugstvedt, 2019).

Conflicting values and interests

In addition to being characterized by scientific knowledge gaps, radicalization and violent extremism are also highly contested issues that bring to the surface conflicting values and interests. Inconclusive research based knowledge permits stakeholders of different orientations to maintain that *their* preferred means to tackle radicalization should be given priority - be it social, psychological, political or legal (RAN, 2016; Bull & Rane, 2018; Hayes, 2017; Pretus et al., 2018; Vergani, Iqbal, Ilbahar, & Barton, 2018). Related national debates about whether to prioritize punitive or supportive approaches to tackle violent extremism are likewise difficult to resolve.

Punitive and supportive approaches may be complementary. But at times they conflict and cause dilemmas at the local operational level. Local government has a dual role in both providing supporting services to its citizens, but also some degree of control, like in the child protection service (Forkby, Höyer & Liljegren, 2015), probation services (Day, 1979) and mental health services (Conn, 2018). In the case of preventing violent extremism, this double role is substantially more pointed and may fuel mistrust between citizens and municipalities (Lid et al., 2016). Local government needs to navigate a dual agenda of protecting national security and vulnerable citizens (Hemmingsen, 2017). While the multiagency cooperation is agreed upon in theory, practical challenges at times arise at the local operational level, when

police and national security services cooperate with teachers (Reed, 2016), social workers (Coppock & McGovern, 2014; Herz, 2016; McKendrick & Finch, 2016), local communities and religious organizations (Cherney & Hartley, 2017). A social worker might have both different goals and rely on other strategies when working with, for example, returning foreign fighters than staff from the security services. When these professionals engage in cooperation at the local level, the values and attitudes that guide their different professions may result in conflicting and contradictory perceptions of the task at hand, how to address it, and which working goals to pursue. Those involved in soft approaches to countering violent extremism, like teachers, health care workers and social workers (Hoeft, 2015), are relying on trust to get access to their target groups. Trust is found to be a key component in how social workers, educators and other first line prevention workers try to facilitate dialogue with those deemed at risk of being in process of radicalization (Ponsot et al., 2017; Haugstvedt, 2019). This approach is, at least at the conceptual level, strongly divergent from strategies within national security and intelligence work (Stefan, 2012).

Institutional complexity

While trust is often highlighted as a key issue if cooperation between security services and local communities and individuals is to emerge (Spalek, 2010), trust between agencies and professionals with different backgrounds is found to be just as important for the effectiveness of collaboration between social workers, police and psychiatric services (Harte, 2015; Sestoft, Rasmussen, Vitus & Kongsrud, 2004; Wood & Watson, 2017).

The logics and discourses that govern national security services and social services are obviously different, and at the operational level this may create different assessments and approaches to the same situation (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Lund, 2019, 181).

Also, legislation limits some municipal workers, such as social workers and health care professionals, from sharing information with police and security services (Gundhus, Egge, Strype & Myhrer, 2008; Lid et al., 2016). While the legislation governing confidentiality is strong within many professions, the duty to avert serious crime, such as acts of terror, is of higher legislative order in both Denmark and Norway. The issue arises when the local prevention workers have to assess the likelihood of a crime possibly happening, without sharing and discussing their concern with other services and agencies.

4. How the Wicked Problem Notion can Help Tackle Violent Extremism

Though the concept of the wicked problem, as mentioned above, occasionally emerges in the literature on violent extremism and terrorism, it mainly serves to describe and highlight the complexities of the issues (Carlsson 2017, 8; Fischbacher-Smith 2016; Noordegraaf et al. 2019, 285). Rarely is the concept applied during in-depth discussions of how to *cope* with terrorism, radicalization, and violent extremism.⁵

As mentioned above, Rittel and Webber originally introduced the notion of wicked problems as a critique of rational, centralized public planning approaches. Contemporary researchers likewise dismiss centralized regimes and New Public Management inspired governance set-ups as inappropriate when it comes to wicked problems. But whereas Rittel and Webber emphasized that wicked problems cannot be *solved* and pointed to the absence of scientifically reliable criteria for evaluating outcomes, recent research emphasizes how wicked problems may nevertheless be *tackled* (Head & Alford 2015, 716). When tackling a wicked problem, the goal should not be to arrive at any “ultimate solution,” but to learn across from different perspectives, reach a shared understanding of the nature of the problem, negotiate ways of approaching it, develop better intervention capacities, and act coherently across from stakeholders when using these capacities (Conklin, 2006; Head & Alford, 2015, 719; Noordegraaf et al., 2017). But what, more specifically, does this require in terms of institutional arrangements, and from the policy-makers, public sector leaders, and front-line practitioners who are involved?

We suggest the existence of an untapped source of potential learning from recent research on wicked problems that may aid practitioners and policymakers in building, assessing, and strengthening local governance capacity to tackle the knowledge gaps, interest and value conflicts and institutional complexity involved when tackling violent extremism. In order to structure these insights in a way that could provide a starting point for cumulative research we extract insights that recur across many of these studies and organize them into a conceptual model with three categories: Institutional set-up, leadership strategies and approaches, individual stakeholder competencies. We suggest that policymakers and practitioners need to pay attention to these three categories, in order to assess and strengthen local governance

⁵ Noordegraaf et al (2017, 402) provide an exception by illustrating how the concept of wicked problem may enrich evaluation practice in a way that reflects back on the field under evaluation, e.g. by promoting dialogue and strengthening connectivity amongst the actors of the field under evaluation.

capacity to tackle violent extremism. The model may serve as a point of departure for further empirical explorations to ground it in the perceived reality of front-line staff charged with preventing violent extremism.

Institutional set-up

Wicked problems are complex, transboundary problems characterized by scientific knowledge gaps. Several scholars consequently suggest the need for collaboration, cooperation, and networked approaches as alternatives to centralized or New Public Management inspired approaches. They underline the benefits of combining knowledge, resources, and implementation capacities across from several stakeholders. These stakeholders need to interact regularly and build trust and mutual commitment.⁶ They also need a degree of autonomy vis-a-vis the authorizing environment. That is, to enable a network to produce compromises and common decisions, policymakers need to abstain from micromanaging decisions and managers in the participants' home organizations and need to delegate decision making power. The legislative framework must accommodate the need share information and flexible budgeting procedures may also be necessary to permit the stakeholders to continuously try out new approaches to tackle a problem, learn, and adjust (Head & Alford, 2015, 726-728; Termeer et al., 2015, 691).

Leadership strategies and approaches

The institutional complexity that necessarily results from a networked approach to tackling wicked problems precludes classical bureaucratic top down leadership. Instead, as emphasized by several scholars, effective leadership will often be informal and lateral. Leaders must strive to build narratives that include and accommodate the views and values of many different stakeholders – a shared narrative about the goal, problem, and possible solutions that respects and includes multiple voices (Head & Alford 2015, 723). They argue that when dealing with the complexity, contestation, and uncertainty of wicked problems, a leader's primary task is not to diagnose the problem and set the direction – efforts likely to be self-defeating when dealing with a wicked problem in a coalition of autonomous stakeholders. Instead, the leader should induce others to adapt to evolving challenges, accommodate diverse

⁶ Koppenjan and Klijn (2004, 214) underline the need to make sure that relevant actors are included. These may be actors with knowledge and capabilities of importance to tackle the problem. Alternatively, it may be hitherto underrepresented or marginalized actors who need to be included for the sake of the legitimacy of the process and its eventual outcome.

perspectives, accept the presence of paradoxes, encourage experimentation and learning, and delegate authority (Head & Alford 2015, 729). An additional important leadership competency is what some scholars term “responsiveness.” Responsiveness is about recognizing and responding appropriately to emerging public and political demands (Termeer et al., 2015, 692). Arguably, this is about protecting the network approach from being undermined by political intervention and micromanagement, which may result if the network is perceived as unresponsive.

As wicked problems are characterized by conflicts of interest and values that may not always be easily overcome by trust-building and common learning, skillful leadership is also about negotiation skills and process management. Scholars highlight that network leaders must learn to intertwine competing goals so that a solution simultaneously furthers the interests and values of several stakeholders (Koppenjan & Klijn 2004, 163). They highlight the need to de-conflict and unlock situations, for example by bringing in outsiders to question perceptions that are taken-for-granted or to play devil’s advocate if one stakeholder’s perspective has become too dominant (Koppenjan & Klijn 2004, 110 and 171).⁷

Individual stakeholder competencies

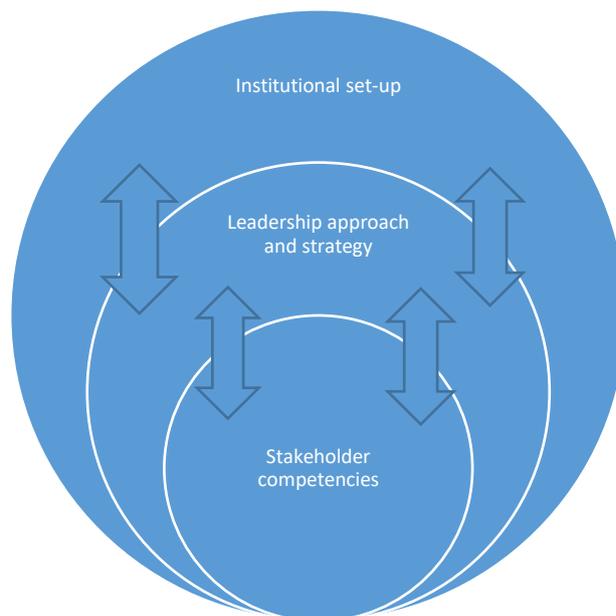
As a final category in our conceptual model of wicked problem governance capacity, we suggest the need to focus on stakeholder competencies. Several scholars offer insights into what it takes to navigate transboundary problems characterized by knowledge gaps and conflicts within a complex institutional set-up. They include reflexivity and the ability to see a variety of perspectives on a problem, resilience and adaptability to changing circumstances, and the will to experiment and learn as well as acceptance of the presence of paradoxes (Head & Alford 2015, 729; Termeer et al., 2015, 690). These points align well with insights from the field of management studies and with newer change management research as well as with research into risk management strategies and practices when coping with uncertainty and unpredictability.⁸

⁷ Koppenjan and Klijn (2004, 178-179) also elaborate on how research may play into the process, not as an arbiter between different standpoints or by having parties to the conflict commission their own research (resulting in “report wars”), but instead by indicating “which standpoints can be maintained given the state of scientific insights, which issues cannot be conclusively determined, and what, given available knowledge, is the room for maneuver within which solutions can be found.” Research may also investigate the likely effects of proposed solutions.

⁸ See for example Weick & Sutcliffe. 2007. *Managing the Unexpected: Resilient Performance in an Age of Uncertainty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Wildavsky. 1993. *Searching for Safety*. Oxford: Transaction Publishers.

While a major strength of this recent literature is that it is occupied with how to handle real life public policy problems, few scholars have attempted to integrate, generalize, and theorize in ways that could move the discussion beyond lists of suggested behaviors and called-for competencies. To do so, we suggest focusing upon the three categories outlined above and to organize them into a conceptual model of what we term wicked problem governance capacity. As illustrated in figure 1. we suggest that such capacity is constituted by a triad of 1) institutional set-up, 2) leadership approaches and strategies, and 3) individual stakeholder competencies. These should be seen as mutually constitutive: Individual competencies are conditioned by and nested inside leadership approaches and strategies, which again are conditioned by and nested inside the institutional framework of local government. Yet, as indicated by the double-edged arrows, individual agency of staff may affect the strategies and approaches of leaders, and staff and leaders may change the institutional set-up in which they operate.

Figure 1:



5. Research Agenda: Grounding Wicked Problem Theory in Danish and Norwegian Prevention Experiences

From the US to Australia, local governments and civil society increasingly figure as key actors in national strategies for countering violent extremism. Building on preexisting local crime prevention networks, Denmark and Norway have been among the frontrunners in supplementing national counterterrorism efforts with local preventive efforts. Below we briefly introduce the Danish and the Norwegian models before outlining a research agenda for grounding wicked problem theory in light of the experience of Danish and Norwegian practitioners.

Denmark has a long history of cooperation between services and professionals in the municipalities, and the police. The so-called SSP-model (Schools, Social Services and Police) has existed since 1977, and was established as a response to growing youth crime at that time, to improve prevention work and strengthen cooperation between different government agencies (Pedersen & Stothard, 2015). Since the early 2000s, preventing and countering violent extremism has received increased attention and the task has been added to the SSP-portfolio, involving social workers, educators, police and security services (Hemmingsen, 2017). The Danish approach has received massive international interest, especially after Mayor of Aarhus, Jacob Bundsgaard, visited the White House in Washington D.C. (Segawa, 2015), promoting rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees from Iraq and Syria.

Preventing radicalization and violent extremism has also been high on the political agenda in Norway. While the Danish and Norwegian prevention models are not identical, they share many features. At local level in Norway, prevention work is typically organized through the SLT-model (Cooperation between local drug and crime prevention efforts). The SLT-model was introduced in the early 1990s and is an adaption of the Danish SSP model (Gundhus et al., 2008). Today, nearly 180 municipalities have organized their local prevention work through the SLT-model (Carlsson, 2017). The newest agency taking part in this cooperation is the Police Security Service (PST). During recent years, the service has attempted to open up and share more knowledge and information about extremism. Still, several municipalities experience PST as too “tight-lipped” and want more information about the local situation (Carlsson, 2017).

Among the strengths of the SSP- and SLT-models is that local prevention workers meet on a regular basis, get to know each other's tasks, responsibilities and culture, lowering the threshold for initiating well-organized prevention work. Some of the larger cities show an impressive track record of, for example, ensuring that returning foreign fighters reintegrate into the job market or enroll in educational institutions.⁹

But the efforts have not been free from challenges and dilemmas. As evidenced by failed and foiled attacks, court cases, and the relatively high number of individuals who travelled to join militant Islamist groups in the Syrian conflict from 2012 and onwards, local prevention models do not represent a “magic cure”. And not all frontline workers seem confident when it comes to understanding and handling the challenge. A recent mapping exercise revealed significant discrepancies across Danish municipalities as to how radicalization is defined, understood, and tackled (Rambøll, 2018, 11-14). In Norway, though some municipal staff frame violent extremism as a social issue and handle it accordingly (Haugstvedt, 2019), others express uncertainty about how to identify and deal with those at risk of becoming radicalized (Lid et al., 2016).

A range of dilemmas also afflict local prevent efforts. The different professional logics of security service officials, police officers, educators, health professionals, and social workers may clash, and trust between frontline workers and local civil society can suffer if social workers, youth workers, and health workers are perceived to be too close to the security authorities (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Lund, 2019, 181; Lindekilde, 2015, 434; Carlsson, 2017; Lid et al., 2016). Additionally, local respondents in a Danish study raised concern about the negative impact of national ‘tough-on-crime’ and ‘tough-on-immigration’ discourses when it comes to building trust and reaching out to marginalized Muslim youth. Others note an inclination amongst national policymakers to micromanage local responses via ever tighter legislation (Christensen, Lægheid, & Rykkja, 2016). This approach risks restricting local room for maneuver, reducing the ability of practioners to flexibly handle individual cases that may call for very different interventions – punitive or supportive (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Schack 2016, 13-14). Finally, answers to the fundamental question “how well does it work?” have proven elusive. While parts of the Danish and Norwegian efforts, for example the education and training offered to selected frontline staff, has been evaluated, no attempts to offer an

⁹ According to journalistic research by the Danish radio 24/7 and the newspaper *Berlingske*, 17 of 20 individuals who had returned to Aarhus were, as of March 2019, in either job or enrolled into an educational institution. In Copenhagen, six out of 13 returnees were in job or education. Lingren (2019). I Østjylland får hjemvendte jihadister uddannelse, job og familie. *Berlingske* 03.03.2019.

overall assessment of local governance capacity within the area of prevention of extremism has been attempted. Arguably, we still lack systematic knowledge of how to build, assess and strengthen local governance capacity as regards prevention of violent extremism (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Lund, 2019, 185).

We believe that Denmark and Norway are particularly interesting cases to study in order to ground wicked problem theory in the everyday practices and experiences of local stakeholders. The longstanding collaborative efforts in these two high-trust societies should offer a better window on the opportunities of tackling wicked problems in networks than the efforts of countries who have only recently begun to pursue this path and societies characterized by less generalized trust. Moreover, obstinate and enduring challenges and dilemmas are also more likely to have become manifest in longstanding collaborations than in recent ones and practitioners are more likely to have insights to offer as to how to tackle them in practice and with what effects.

Specifically, we suggest further inquiries along the following paths:

Several wicked problem scholars suggest that practitioners may experience “paralysis” due to the overwhelming challenge of beginning to tackle a wicked problem (Termeer et al., 2019, 176). While this may hold for some practitioners in Norway and Denmark, but certainly not for all. In several municipalities local professionals seem to engage routinely and confidently with the issue of violent extremism. How come? An exploration of whether or not local professionals perceive that their efforts to cope with specific cases of violent extremism are hampered by scientific uncertainty, conflicting values, or institutional complexity should help us develop a more fine-grained picture of the “wickedness” of violent extremism as a public policy problem. Comparing municipalities where front line workers express confidence with municipalities where this is not the case could be structured along the categories of figure 1. to begin to test whether the categories of our conceptual model offers a relevant analytical tool.

From a theoretical point of view, one may expect the Nordic collaboration models to “tame” the institutional complexity aspect of wicked problems by providing a regular framework for interaction that promotes information sharing, trust, and common solutions. Does this fit with the experienced reality of frontline practitioners? As outlined above, there is evidence of tensions and dilemmas in the Danish and Norwegian local preventive efforts. We suggest a more systematic exploration of whether and how local practitioners experience and cope with

such tensions and dilemmas. When are the different professional logics able to see “the whole picture” and understand the concerns of other professionals? Under what conditions do different professional logics appear most likely to clash, co-exist, accommodate each other, learn from each other? What dilemmas arise when seen through the eyes of street level practitioners (security concerns vs. preserving trust between professional and client; preventing and supporting vs. sanctioning; sharing info vs. protecting individual rights to privacy)? How do practitioners navigate the dilemmas? Do security logics tend to dominate other professional logics? Why/why not? Is there a common ground between the different stakeholders and if yes, how did it emerge?

Comparative data from municipalities who have long worked with prevention and municipalities who have only recently begun to do so may throw light on which processes, factors, mechanisms, rituals, and approaches develop over time. This may serve to refine our current understanding of the dynamism of coping with wicked problems and to expand on the repertoire of coping strategies and competencies identified by extant research.

Our conceptual model of local governance capacity to tackle wicked problems suggest the importance of an institutional set-up that ensures the local network a degree of autonomy and insulation from micromanagement and occasionally contentious national debates about violent extremism, integration, and security. We suggest refining and grounding this aspect of our model via studies of the perceptions of practitioners as to the national political discourse and national political initiatives and legislation. When does it help/hinder local officials in their efforts to cope from day to day? What are the spoken or unspoken success criteria and expectations directed at the local work by national level policymakers, the public, and the media? Are they helpful or not? Do local practitioners fear becoming caught up in a blame game in the wake of a security incident?

Noordegraaf et al. suggest that local routines and multidisciplinary, regular meetings of local frontline staff permit professionals to cope with preventing radicalization “without being overwhelmed by the wickedness at the systems level” (Noordegraaf et al., 2019, 294). We observe that the Danish and Norwegian SSP and SLT models may have a similar effect. However, occasionally the systemic level seems to “intrude”: Research on local resilience to violent extremism indicates that punitive and Islam-critical national discourses can discourage local, voluntary efforts to promote integration, and complicate the trust building efforts of

local authorities vis-à-vis Muslim minorities. Meanwhile, tighter legislation that criminalizes travel to specific conflict zones like Syria complicates the effort to make families contact authorities when youth return. Tougher sanctions in general make civil society actors more reluctant to contact authorities if they are concerned about possible radicalization (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Schack, 2016).

Building on these observations we suggest inquiring more deeply and asking: What does an enabling national political context look like? Specifically, could the concept of wicked problem help local professionals communicate their need for more room to maneuver more effectively to a national audience? Does the wicked problem concept offer a conceptualization of preventing violent extremism that would permit local practitioners to capture and communicate the challenges they face in a way that would facilitate the building of realistic political and public expectations as to which kinds of “solutions” to expect. This may help counteract blame games, short termism and swings in policy. It may also help discourage attempts at micromanagement of local issues and preserve the necessary local flexibility to accommodate a diversity of cases and individual needs. We suggest exploring this via interviews with policymakers, journalists/the media, and studies of how the public reacts and forms expectations (about success, failure, realistic outcomes) as a result of how the nature of a public policy problem is framed and explained.

6. Conclusion

In this working paper, we have argued that the wicked problem notion offers a useful lens on the challenges of local efforts to prevent violent extremism. Countries like Denmark and Norway have been among the frontrunners in building and relying on local, networked, multiagency prevention approaches that are often held out as exemplars on the international level. But their efforts have not been free from challenges and dilemmas and we still lack good answers to the fundamental question “how well does it work?”

We argue that insights from the wicked problem literature can aid practitioners in better understanding and tackling the challenges pertaining to local prevention. We suggested a conceptual model based on extant research as a starting point for a structured discussion and for a cumulative research program that will investigate how to build and assess local governance capacity to prevent violent extremism. Empirical studies of the Nordic models offer a good starting point for this research agenda, which aims to refine wicked problem theory further and ground it in the experience of practitioners.

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